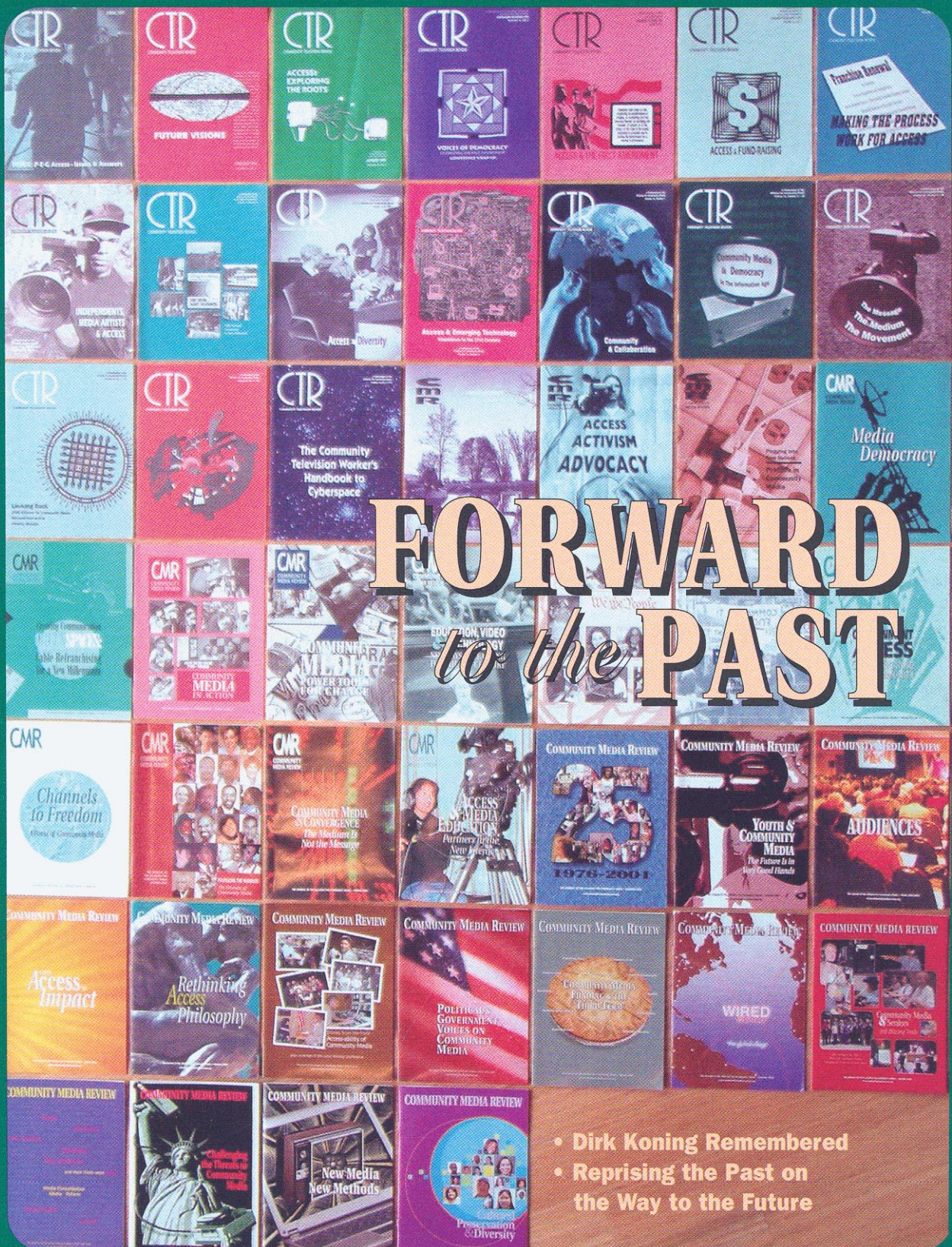


COMMUNITY MEDIA REVIEW



- Dirk Koning Remembered
- Reprising the Past on the Way to the Future

THE JOURNAL OF THE ALLIANCE FOR COMMUNITY MEDIA • WINTER 2004-2005

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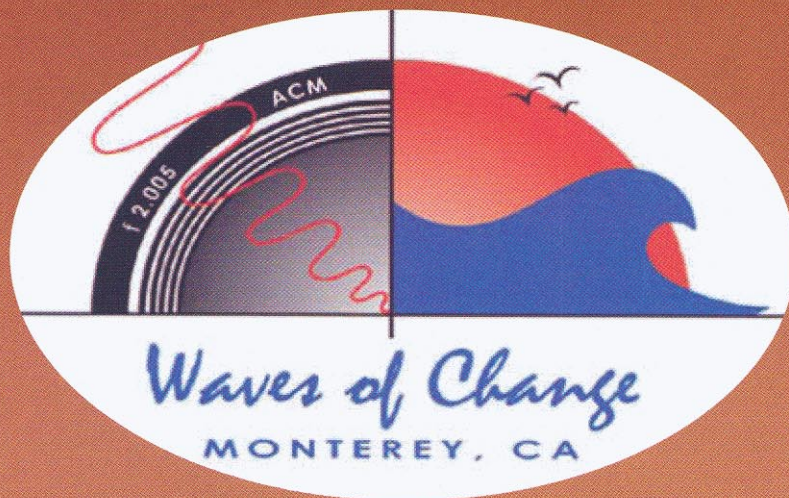
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WINTER 2004
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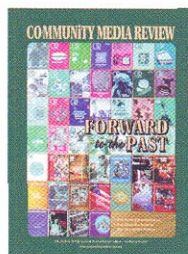
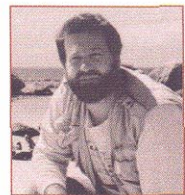
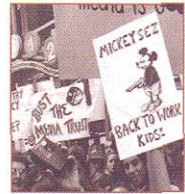
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ON THE COVER

The collage of covers from COMMUNITY MEDIA REVIEWS [and CTRs] from the 1990s and 2000s on this issue of CMR represents less than half of those in the publication's 28-year archives, the source of articles for this issue, as we reprise a few that help frame some of the philosophical underpinnings we hold dear as community media activists.

As the journal of the Alliance for Community Media, COMMUNITY MEDIA REVIEW shall support the Alliance mission by providing: a comprehensive overview of past, present and future issues critical to the Alliance and its membership; vigorous and thoughtful debate on those issues; and a venue for members and like-minded groups to present issues critical to the Alliance.



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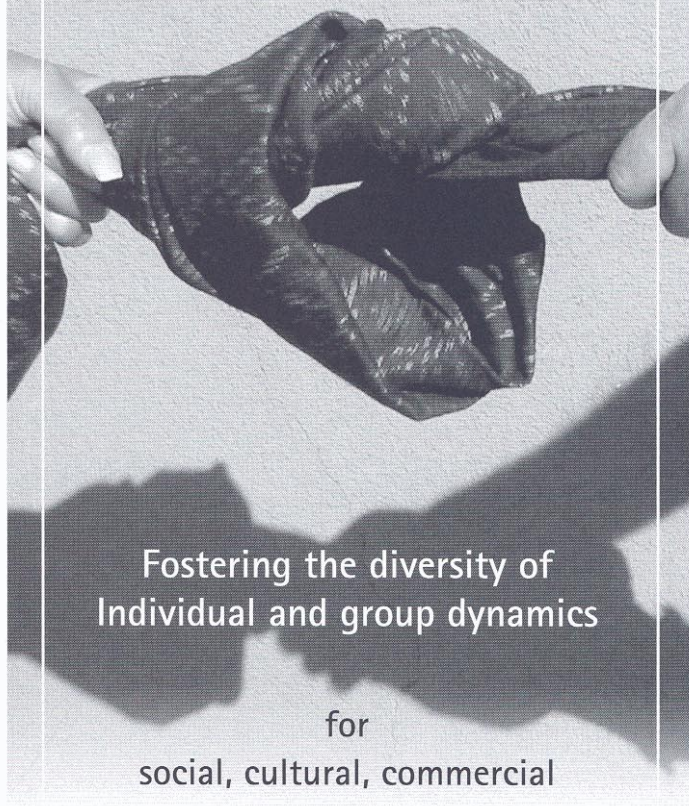
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FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Moving Forward, Looking Back

BY ANTHONY RIDDLE

The next two issues of COMMUNITY MEDIA REVIEW are inextricably linked: This issue represents Community Media Past and the next, Community Media Future. One cannot talk about the latter without first considering the former.

Recently, I have been dubbing all my old VHS, 3/4" and Betamax tapes to DVD. It saves so much space and is so much easier to maintain than those wrinkly, oxide-flaking, sticking-together-and-breaking, Alzheimer's-waiting-to-happen that I have entrusted with my history. Last weekend, as I was dubbing tapes from the 1996 Cable Act hearings, I was taken by the very wild, utopian ideas expressed by some of the Congressional Representatives, nameless for now, in support of deregulation and consolidation of ownership. There were many unbelievable comments about how well the public interest would be served automatically in a 500-channel universe. There was confidence that deregulation would lead to greater competition.

Instead, the opposite has happened. Objective reports show that cable news services have adopted entertainment formats in the race for greater profits. As fewer cable companies gain greater control of the market, they also have a greater share in ownership and control of the content they deliver to maximize profit. Smaller internet and broadband providers are constantly driven out of business by cable and telecom giants.

But what interested me most was that the arguments made by business, the few representatives of community and the committee members all relied heavily on an ability predict the future. It was a contest. As though it were a sports show during which the sportscasters prove their mental acumen by predicting contradictory outcomes to the same event. Why is this activity so important to us humans? Because those who accurately predict the future on a regular basis are more likely to choose the correct path in the present.

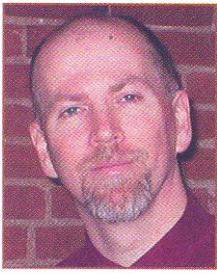
In looking at CMR—and its predecessor, COMMUNITY TELEVISION REVIEW—we are struck by how prescient and accurate have been the articles carried in these pages. There has been a consistent and strong balance between noting possibility and threat in technology and politics. The articles have been written by early luminaries of community media—George Stoney, Sue Buske, Bob Devine, Dirk Koning, Fred Johnson, John Higgins and others. They have included the stories and observations of countless blue-collar community activists and organizers. And, of course, Managing Editor Tim Goodwin and Editorial Board Chair Dirk Koning have woven a powerful and consistent voice throughout.

As we look forward to making the changes to CMR that new technology demands, we take this moment to look back. The Asante people of Ghana have a symbol called *Sankofa*—a swan with its graceful neck turned to the rear. It means, "One cannot move forward without first looking back." Historical perspective, trajectory, direction.

In this issue, we invite our friends to look back at our words and deeds. The Alliance for Community Media was community media before community media was cool. We know who we are, we know why we're here and we know where we all should be going. Our organization has embodied the true spirit community media for almost 30 years. In this issue we review. In the next, having caught a fresh breath, we will renew, reorganize and refocus on the next 30.

Anthony Riddle [raiseeveryvoice@yahoo.com] is the new executive director of the Alliance for Community Media.

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FROM THE ALLIANCE CHAIR

Mind If I Philosophize?

BY TOM BISHOP

Give me one public access producer, one school video instructor, one city telecommunications officer, one non-profit community access executive director, one community radio station general manager, an unlimited bar tab and the ability to fiddle around with the space-time continuum, and I can provide you with a work on community media philosophy to rival the works of Aristotle and Plato...

...and when its all said and done you'd find that not everyone agreed, and that's part of the beauty of our movement. Paraphrasing from Tip O'Neil, all access philosophy is local, and more than that, it's personal.

We all have different motivations that bring us to community media. Some are activists, some feel the need to broaden the horizons of others, some want to change the world and some just want to have fun.

But underneath all this is an idea we can all agree on; we need electronic green space. We need a place to carry out our personal philosophy of community media.

At the recent National Conference on Media Reform I had the opportunity to see not only how threatened that electronic green space is (something we in Community Media have known for a long time) but also how strong a movement there is for changes in our laws to ensure and grow a media that serves communities and individuals.

Imagine that, a media where everyone can say what they want, not just the rich and powerful. A media where communities can come together instead of being divided by what passes for news on most broadcast stations. A media that actually fulfills the vision of our nations founders and holds government accountable instead of currying its favor.

And the beautiful thing is that we have allies in this vision. Community WiFi proponents, LPFM advocates, creators of zines and underground newspapers,

Imagine that, a media where everyone can say what they want, not just the rich and powerful. A media where communities can come together instead of being divided by what passes for news on most broadcast stations. A media that actually fulfills the vision of our nations founders and holds government accountable instead of currying its favor.

broadcasters who are tired of being more commodity than communicator, citizens who don't know beans about the Telecommunications Act of 1996 but know that there is something wrong with their local media and many, many more.

All of these people hold their own philosophical views as to why we need media that is for the people and by the people but they agree that we need it. And that right there is your most basic philosophy for community access. We need media that is for the people and by the people.

My philosophy on Community Media is pretty broad. I want a place for all people to communicate; I want all people to have the tools they need communicate; I want all people to have the training necessary to use those tools. For me that is cause enough. For others it is their specific cause that necessitates a vibrant community media. It might be spreading their faith, speaking out on issues of public policy or seeing to it that young athletes get the exposure and recognition they deserve.

The difference here is one of degree. For me, and many of you, community media is our cause. For many who make use of the services we help provide, it is a means to their own primary end.

It brings to mind something that our late friend Dirk Koning often said in reference to community broadband, "This is oxygen." Community Media is the oxygen necessary for communities to survive and thrive. It is the fuel that makes so many

other items of importance possible.

By now you've probably noticed the inherent danger for amateur philosophers like me..., the tendency to ramble! But I defend that practice because in such ramblings the new ideas and kernels of truth that help enhance and define our movement are found.

The theme of this edition of the Community Media Review is "Forward To The Past," and in it we look at the very foundations of access with articles from previous CMRs by much more learned access philosophers than me. You'll read about the philosophy in what we do and the motivations that bring us together.

We often get caught up in the day-to-day activities of working in Community Media: DVD's and BNC cables and microphones and camera reservations. We don't always take the time to step back, view the whole field of play and contemplate our movement with a broader vision.

This CMR is a golden opportunity to take that step back, shut out the noise and glare, and think about why we are here and where we want to see this organization and this movement go in the future.

Tom Bishop [tom@mediabridges.org] is executive director of Media Bridges in Cincinnati and chair of the National Board of the Alliance for Community Media.

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OFFICERS

TOM BISHOP CHAIR
Media Bridges Cincinnati
1100 Race St.
Cincinnati, OH 45202
Voice: 513.651.4171 / Fax: 513.651.1106
Email: tom@mediabridges.org

MIKE WASSENAAR VICE CHAIR
SPNN
214 East 4th St., Ste. 200
St. Paul, MN 55101
Voice: 651.298.8900 / Fax: 651.298.8414
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NANCY RICHARD TREASURER
Plymouth Area Community Access Television
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RUTH MILLS SECRETARY/FUNDRAISING CHAIR
Whitewater Community Television
c/o Indiana University East
2325 Chester Blvd.
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REGIONAL CHAIRS & REPRESENTATIVES

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Metro TV-Louisville Metro Government
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MARION WARE MID-ATLANTIC CHAIR
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300 S. Center St. #111
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Email: mware@carr.org

JULIENNE TURNER NORTHWEST CHAIR
CCTV
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Salem, OR 97309
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Email: julie@cctvsalem.org

DAVID VOGEL SOUTHEAST CHAIR
CTV Knoxville
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Voice: 865.215.4350 / Fax: 865.215.4337
Email: david@communityknox.org

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Antioch College
317 W. North College
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Voice: 937.767.7035 / Fax: 937.769.1071
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Remembering Dirk Koning 1957-2005

BY TIM GOODWIN

He stood six feet eight inches tall and he was dressed in a T-shirt with a slogan on it and his name was Dirk and he loomed over me to ask if I had a few minutes to talk about public access TV. Sure. Hell, yes. As soon as my pulse rate returned to normal. As soon as I could stop wondering whether I'd get to keep my credit cards. Actually, once I realized he did not intend to carve a zodiacal sign on my abdomen with the rusted edge of an Indiana license plate, I sort of welcomed his company."

So began Pulitzer Prize-winning media critic Ron Powers in his July 1986 column in *GQ* magazine following the annual meeting of the National Cable Television Association in Dallas. Of all the 13,148 "bust-my-buttons bidnisspeople" there, he found Dirk's rap on community media the most compelling.

Dirk Koning was a big man! "Five-foot-twenty" he often would tell people who invariably asked. Overseas he would

answer "two-meters plus." Height was his most obvious feature, and it served him and the community media mission well. Inevitably, it found its way into scores of articles (this one no exception) and in most of the eulogies that followed his death February 10, 2005 from an often-done heart procedure gone fatally wrong.

Physically big that he was, Dirk was absolutely huge in our movement. He was, I would tell him, the best thing I ever did for community media, an honor I had as founding chair of the Grand Rapids Community Media Center when we hired him as executive director in 1981. It was a choice between public access television or the U.S. Peace Corps for him. Hiring Dirk was also one of the best things I ever did for myself. We became best of friends, soul mates, and fellow travelers along this path of democratic communications and free speech. Then as now, it was all about the mission, this philosophy of building community through media.

"Every man a king, Huey Long once said," Powers concluded in that 1986 column. "Access television is beginning to promise that every man can at least be a Ted Turner. Or a Dirk Koning. Eat your heart out Dallas. The hour of Grand Rapids approacheth."

Dirk defined the very meaning of community media. The medium was never the message. It was never just television. Never just radio. Never just the internet. It was all those things and more.

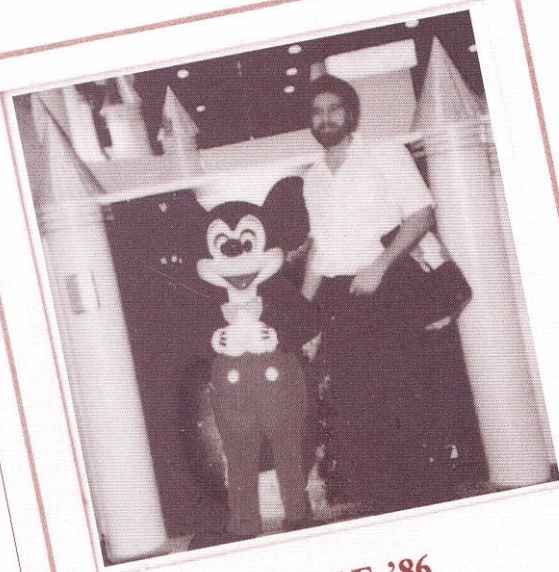
These were just tools to

Dirk. He was, he said, a "community organizer, around the use of media to share information." Maybe you'd expect no less from this son of a missionary who began life on a Zuni Indian reservation in New Mexico.

Dirk understood early where the technology was heading. "It seemed to me such a natural evolution—convergence of all information into digital transmission," he said, "Voice, video and data would not necessarily be independent worlds any longer, either in the media or the methods." And then he set out to make it so at the Grand Rapids Community Media Center, which today exemplifies the community media center model with its public access television, FM radio station, nonprofit internet service provider, computer access, and media literacy institute. Dirk saw long-term survival in providing all things media to the community, and he had a knack for keeping his eyes on the prize.

"We have an old fashioned co-op with a new tech twist," he told me. "There's a sound bite for you!"

And Dirk is largely the reason you're reading *COMMUNITY MEDIA REVIEW* right now. For many years, up until his death, he was chair of the CMR Editorial Board. His byline appears in CMR more often than anyone else. He was guest editor-in-chief more often than anyone else. During some tenuous times for the Alliance [then NFLCP], he managed to rescue CMR [then CTR] from obscurity. He prevailed on me to become managing editor in the early 1990s, and again when I returned from Russia and the Peace Corps in 1997.



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A souvenir Polaroid from the 1986 NCTA convention.



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He was huge too in the hearts and minds of those who knew him, and his death has left a bigger void in our spirits than his physical presence ever did in our material lives. To know Dirk was to be his friend, as I, and many of you in this movement, had the great joy to know.

Dirk was a citizen of the world with a keen sense of justice, not unlike his personal hero, Albert Einstein, whom he admired as much or more for his humanity as for his science. Dirk carried this seed of liberty we call community media to far corners of our planet, from South Korea to South Africa to South America, Europe and hundred stops in between, maybe one of them in your own backyard. To Dirk, these were seeds of peace and understanding. To understand each other was the first step to respecting each other, a prelude to peace, whether it was neighborhoods or nations. He used the tools at his command and his own unique presence and gift for story telling to make the case. The world is richer for it.

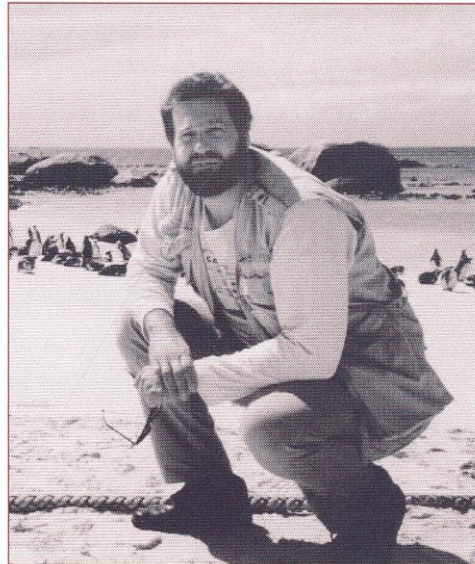
So it was no surprise that people came to his memorial services from three continents and from across the United States on Valentine's Day 2005. It was a measure of the respect and love in which his peers held him. You just didn't expect death from someone as serendipitous as Dirk Koning, though.

At the time of his death, he and his wife Ginger were considering their next moves in life. Wherever it might have led, it never would have been too far from community media. The future seemed bright. 2007 was to be that seminal year. The kids, Shaun, 20, and Kelly, 16, both would be in college. Another capital campaign would be completed, this time for yet another expression of community in the rescue of an historic neighborhood

theater from a struggling nonprofit. But it just wasn't to be. A procedure to correct a condition of atrial fibrillation went awry, and Dirk became a one in a thousand statistic.

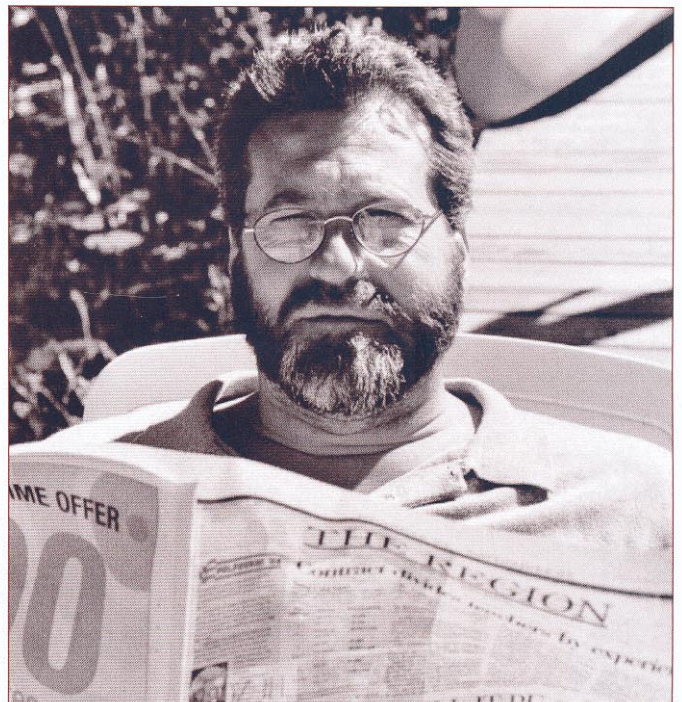
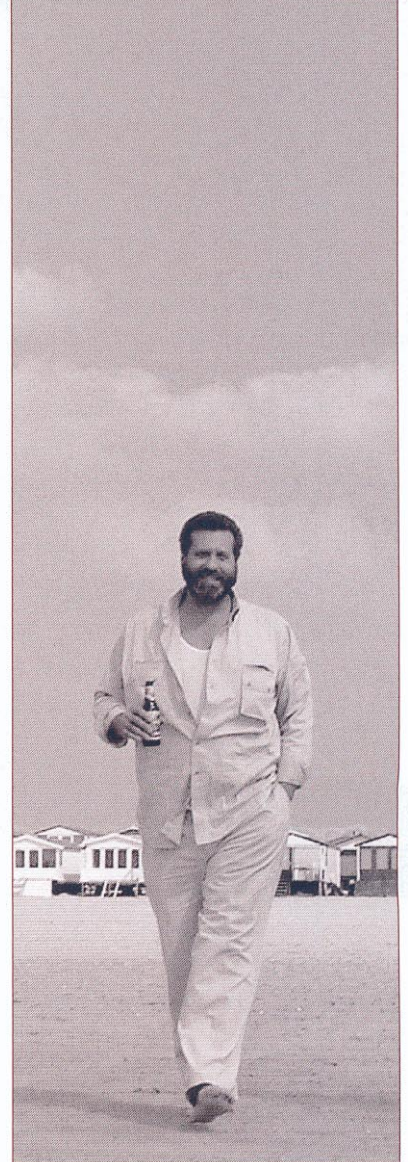
We mourn our loss. As City of Grand Rapids Mayor George Heartwell paraphrased Wendell Berry in his eulogy to him, "Dirk, we are you, inheritors of what we mourn. You have, indeed, given us a rich inheritance. May God make us worthy to walk in your way, strong to stand against resistance, and unflinching in our commitment to justice."

Tim Goodwin [goodwin@usxc.net] is managing editor of **COMMUNITY MEDIA REVIEW** and founding chair of the **Community Media Center** in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

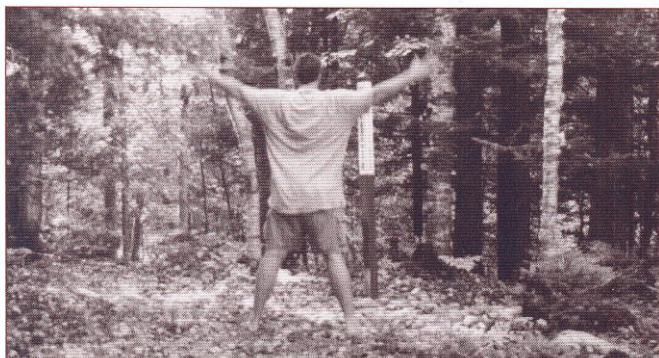


Above, on the shore of the south Atlantic Ocean near Capetown, South Africa.

Above right, pep step and brew on the north Atlantic coast of the Netherlands.



At home on Big Crooked Lake in northern Kent County, Michigan.



Peace pole meditation along the banks of the Jordan River at Riparia in northern Michigan.

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Appointment Book: Opens 9:00 AM to 9:00 PM

Start Date/Time: 6/2/2019 9:00 AM (Wednesday) Select Appointment Book Page: 1 Interval: 10 15 30 60 New Reservation

Updated: 7/9/2020 3:36 pm Legend: [None Reserved] [Some Reserved] [All Reserved] [Overbooked]

| | Edt 1 VHS | Edt 2 VHS | Edt 3 Hlt | Edt 4 Hlt | Screening Room | Training Room |
|-------------|---------------------|-----------------|---------------------|-----------------|---------------------|----------------|
| 6/5 6:00 a | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| 6/5 6:30 a | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| 6/5 6:30 a | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | Fuhrman, Lawrence R | Brewster, Doug |
| 6/5 6:30 a | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | Fuhrman, Lawrence R | Brewster, Doug |
| 6/5 10:00 a | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | Fuhrman, Lawrence R | Brewster, Doug |
| 6/5 10:30 a | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | Fuhrman, Lawrence R | Brewster, Doug |
| 6/5 11:00 a | Belleweher, Michael | 1 | Whitmore, James, Jr | 1 | Fuhrman, Lawrence R | Brewster, Doug |
| 6/5 11:30 a | Belleweher, Michael | 1 | Whitmore, James, Jr | McGarry, Walker | Fuhrman, Lawrence R | Brewster, Doug |
| 6/5 12:00 p | Belleweher, Michael | Public, John Q | Whitmore, James, Jr | McGarry, Walker | Fuhrman, Lawrence R | Brewster, Doug |
| 6/5 12:30 p | Belleweher, Michael | Public, John Q | Whitmore, James, Jr | McGarry, Walker | Fuhrman, Lawrence R | Brewster, Doug |
| 6/5 1:00 p | Belleweher, Michael | Public, John Q | 1 | McGarry, Walker | Fuhrman, Lawrence R | Brewster, Doug |
| 6/5 1:30 p | Belleweher, Michael | Public, John Q | 1 | McGarry, Walker | Fuhrman, Lawrence R | Brewster, Doug |
| 6/5 2:00 p | 1 | Public, John Q | 1 | McGarry, Walker | Fuhrman, Lawrence R | Brewster, Doug |
| 6/5 2:30 p | 1 | Public, John Q | 1 | McGarry, Walker | Fuhrman, Lawrence R | Brewster, Doug |
| 6/5 3:00 p | 1 | Turner, Tom, Jr | 1 | McGarry, Walker | Fuhrman, Lawrence R | Brewster, Doug |
| 6/5 3:30 p | 1 | Turner, Tom, Jr | 1 | McGarry, Walker | Fuhrman, Lawrence R | Brewster, Doug |
| 6/5 4:00 p | 1 | Turner, Tom, Jr | 1 | McGarry, Walker | 1 | 1 |
| 6/5 4:30 p | 1 | Turner, Tom, Jr | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| 6/5 5:00 p | 1 | Turner, Tom, Jr | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| 6/5 5:30 p | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
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| 6/5 6:30 p | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| 6/5 7:00 p | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| 6/5 7:30 p | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |

| Program Schedule | | | | | | | | | |
|------------------|----------------|------------|---------|---------------|----------------------------------|----------|--|-------|--------|
| Channel | Channel X | Date X | Date | Time | Open X | Open | Close | Found | 4 |
| Project ID | X | Program ID | X | Show | X | Open X | Open | Edit | Delete |
| Channel | Start | Length | Proj ID | Project Title | Len | Episodes | Program Title | A | V |
| Channel | Open | Full | Program | Updated | 12/11/2013 8:39 pm | | | | |
| 73 | Sun 07/27/2013 | 10:00:00 | 0:28:00 | 4513 | A Meeting with George | 37148 | 33 A Meeting with George-San Rafael | | |
| 73 | Sun 07/27/2013 | 10:25:00 | 0:10:00 | 4815 | A Access Tucson Promos to Me | 35561 | 18 A Man Knows Thyself | | |
| 73 | Sun 07/27/2013 | 10:30:00 | 0:01:50 | 2007 | A Access Information | 3672 | 0 Access Info on Computer | | |
| 73 | Sun 07/27/2013 | 10:30:00 | 0:58:30 | 1168 | A Jimmy Swaggart Telecast | 37256 | 483 Jimmy Swaggart Telecast 6/15/21 6/22 | | |
| 73 | Sun 07/27/2013 | 11:28:30 | 0:01:00 | 2007 | A Access Information | 3672 | 0 Access Info on Computer | | F |
| 73 | Sun 07/27/2013 | 11:30:00 | 0:30:00 | 3440 | A Tomorrow's World | | | | |
| 73 | Sun 07/27/2013 | 12:00:00 | 1:00:00 | 421 | A Christ Community Church | 37590 | 24 Christ Community Church | | |
| 73 | Sun 07/27/2013 | 13:00:00 | 0:01:50 | 2007 | A Access Information | 3672 | 0 Access Info on Computer | | |
| 73 | Sun 07/27/2013 | 13:57:12 | 0:02:40 | 4074 | A How to meet a God | 35541 | 2 How to meet a God- Short Version | | |
| 73 | Sun 07/27/2013 | 13:59:12 | 0:00:00 | 2777 | A Access Information | 3672 | 0 Access Info on Computer | | F |
| 73 | Sun 07/27/2013 | 14:00:00 | 1:00:00 | | | | | | |
| 73 | Sun 07/27/2013 | 15:00:00 | 1:00:00 | 151 | A AZ Examine | 1153 | 0 AZ Examine LIVE | | |
| 73 | Sun 07/27/2013 | 15:00:00 | 0:01:50 | 4868 | A Access Information | 3672 | 0 Access Info on Computer | | |
| 73 | Sun 07/27/2013 | 15:59:22 | 0:00:30 | 2007 | A Access Information | 3672 | 0 Access Info on Computer | | |
| 73 | Sun 07/27/2013 | 16:00:00 | 0:50:00 | 3360 | A W.I.V.D.D. | 22266 | 0 W.I.V.D.D. LIVE | | |
| 73 | Sun 07/27/2013 | 16:50:00 | 0:10:00 | 4768 | A What Will We Tell The Children | 25512 | 0 What Will We Tell The Children? | | |
| 73 | Sun 07/27/2013 | 17:00:00 | 0:50:00 | 3934 | A Abomation d'Abomation | 20438 | 1 Abomation d'Abomation LIVE | | |
| 73 | Sun 07/27/2013 | 17:50:00 | 0:05:00 | 3600 | A Dream in 2000, We're not There | 26152 | 0 Dream in 2000, We're not There Y | | |
| 73 | Sun 07/27/2013 | 17:55:00 | 0:01:50 | 2007 | A Access Information | 3672 | 0 Access Info on Computer | | F |
| 73 | Sun 07/27/2013 | 18:00:00 | 0:50:00 | 3711 | A Access News | 25434 | 0 Access News LIVE | | |
| 73 | Sun 07/27/2013 | 18:00:00 | 0:10:00 | 2242 | A Shaw E-Don Promos | 37341 | 52 Shaw E-Don Promos: Number 7 | | |
| 73 | Sun 07/27/2013 | 19:00:00 | 0:50:00 | 2347 | A Black Man Knows Thyself | 13584 | 0 Black Man Knows Thyself LIVE | | |
| 73 | Sun 07/27/2013 | 19:00:00 | 0:30:00 | 2955 | A Universal Methods of Parenting | 13211 | 0 Universal Methods of Parenting T | | F |
| 73 | Sun 07/27/2013 | 19:00:00 | 0:01:50 | 4897 | A Access Information | 3672 | 0 Access Info on Computer | | |
| 73 | Sun 07/27/2013 | 19:55:00 | 0:00:30 | 4815 | A Access Tucson Promos to Me | 35548 | 6 Delop Delop | | |

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Set Date Range for Report... Start Date **12/1/2001** End Date **12/31/2003** Include Filter Programs? ☐

Select "Breakdown" Reports... ☒ All ☐ None ☐ Origin ☐ Subject ☐ Organization Type ☐ Organization ☐ Owner ☐ Project Funding ☐ Production Type ☐ Signal Source ☐ Project ☐ Program ☐ Producer ☐ Adult Content ☐ Filter

Program Origins to include... Program Subjects to include... Program Owners to include... Channels to include...

Mark All Mark None Mark All Mark None Mark All Mark None Mark All Mark None

ACM Pool
Internal
Pub Domain
Comedy
Community Service
Education, Adult
Education, Child
Music Video
Music Live
External
Internal
Producer
58
53
60

Your Hometown Access Center

Programming Analysis
For Schedule Dates: 7/1/2001 to 7/31/2001

| | Hours Played | Number of Plays | Number of Different Programs Played |
|-----------------------------------|----------------|-----------------|-------------------------------------|
| All Programming | | | |
| First Run | 192.40 | 226 | 226 |
| Repeat | 1708.77 | 2225 | 350 |
| Total First Run and Repeat | 1891.17 | 2451 | 428 |

By Origin



Facil is the result of a 15 year partnership between Becker Software and Access Tucson, Tucson Arizona's community media center.



*Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.**

It's hard to believe that the Rev. Dr. Everett C. Parker's article that begins this issue was written for his keynote speech at the 1982 annual conference of the National Federation of Local Cable Programmers [today the Alliance for Community Media]. With few changes, it could have been penned just yesterday. That's largely true of all the articles in this issue of COMMUNITY MEDIA REVIEW, reprised from past editions from authors with whom a lot of readers will be familiar.

Where else would you find such articulate defenders of community media and the public sphere as George Stoney, Sue Buske, Dirk Koning, Fred Johnson, Bob Devine, John Higgins, Pat Aufderheide, June Holley, Brenda Trainor, Robert McChesney, and of course, the Rev. Dr. Parker. They've all been on the pages of *CMR* before, some many times. The issues, then as now, seem strangely the same. They have everything to do with protecting the public sphere, regardless of the technology applied.

FORWARD to the PAST

We reprint their articles again here for two reasons. One is to speak to the institutional memory of a movement contained in the pages of *CMR/CTR/NFLCP Newsletter* over the past 28 years. This particular issue of *CMR* is a small taste of the philosophical underpinnings discussed, debated and defended over the years on these pages that have brought us to now. There are many more articles, from many different authors, all of which underscore the need to make this information available as a searchable online archive, something long a goal of the *CMR* Editorial Board.

But the main reason to reprint is that Congress will begin this year to rewrite parts of the 1996 Telecommunications Act, itself a rewrite of the 1934 Act. We hope that these articles are "predictive going forward" and give you a sense of what has been and what is at stake ahead for the future of our telecommunications landscape. The next issue of *CMR*, from guest Editor-in-Chief Lauren-Glenn Davitian, will be called **THE PEOPLE'S GUIDE TO THE REWRITE OF THE 1996 TELECOMMUNICATIONS ACT**. Along with the website being developed to go with that issue, it will provide a blueprint for action. Read both issues and be ready to add your voice to the defense of democratic communications in the United States. Our democracy depends on it.

—Tim Goodwin, Managing Editor

* George Santayana (1863-1952), Spanish-American philosopher and poet, from *The Life of Reason*, 1906

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MACRO SYSTEM

Who Will Benefit from New Technologies?

Keynote address of the Rev. Dr. Everett C. Parker, then director of the Office of Communication, United Church of Christ, at the annual conference of the National Federation of Local Cable Programmers, St. Paul, MN, Friday, July 9, 1982.

We are in the midst of a communications revolution that is bringing about a shift in our way of living that dwarfs our shift from an agricultural to an industrial economy a century ago. Every means of work and relationships undergo change: how we use energy, what jobs are available, what products we will be permitted to buy, how churches and other public organizations will conduct their affairs, even how we will live in families. But even our best experts on the workplace are unable to forecast what life will be like two decades from now.

The dominant force for change is the marriage of electronic means of communication to the computer. A number of technologies that provided communication channels or handled information, and which were once individually distinct, have now been molded into a single whole. Telephones, satellites, television and radio, cable TV, microwave circuits and computers are now so interrelated that the difference between communications and computer services is impossible to distinguish.

In our own generation, we have seen the automobile and television appear and be developed by means of technology and raw economic power, rather than by reason and planning. Our lives were reshaped, willy nilly. The same thing is happening today with communications. The men who control communications have created perhaps the most powerful Washington lobby in our history, and politicians are flying blind at their bidding, setting the rules for this communications game.

That is how it has always been, since Marconi introduced radio; Congress has legislated at the behest of commercial interests, mostly to enhance their ability to turn a profit. The Federal Communications Act of 1934—which is the only policy base for electronic communication this nation has ever had—basically codified what was already a fact, the commercial control of radio. In for-

mulating the Act, Congress did not wrestle much with long-term issues, such as how the nation could most benefit from the exciting new force called radio; or how to make the legislation flexible so the system could be redesigned if it did not work out to the advantage of the American people as a whole.

By 1934, many stations were owned by nonprofit organizations, especially schools and churches. Commercial interests promised fervently that they would fulfill the needs of education, religion, government and cultural interest if they were made licensees. Some members of Congress were unconvinced that these promises would be kept. Senator Robert F. Wagner of New York introduced an amendment to set aside 25 percent of the radio frequencies for use by nonprofit entities. He argued that a substantial portion of the new form of communication, which is dependent on a scarce natural resource—the spectrum—should be dedicated to public service.

The Wagner-Hatfield amendment was defeated. Within months, the vast majority of nonprofit stations were forced off the air, to be replaced by commercial operators who were largely indifferent to public service programming.

The same thing occurred in television. First the licenses, starved for programs, were eager to have their schedules filled from the public sector. Then, as the commercial value of time increased, public service programming was curtailed, until now it is practically nonexistent.

There is no reason to think that cable will fare any differently in the normal course of events. A recent survey of cable operators by *Multichannel News* revealed that, while there is a substantial amount of local programming now, they expect to reduce this service about two percent of total programming with the next five years.

Cable is the baby of the electronic family, grossing about \$3.5 billion in subscriber and pay-cable fees, but growing fast—at the rate of about 250,000 subscribers a month. The recent Supreme

Court decision outlawing State mandated fees for cabling apartment building may put a damper on cable expansion into large cities for a time. But cable is so fashionable, that some way will probably be found to negotiate bearable fees for building owners—unless the DBS operators get there first.

It is unfortunate that the coming of cable is being accepted uncritically by communities from one end of the country to the other. Surveys show that most respondents think that cable is television signals, sport channels and Home Box Office. Very little concern is being expressed about *de facto* control of content by communication conglomerates

The dominant force for change is the marriage of electronic means of communication to the computer. A number of technologies that provided communication channels or handled information, and which were once individually distinct, have now been molded into a single whole.

that can combine marketing power with ownership of media to dominate the marketplace. The entry of the broadcasting networks into cable ownership poses one such threat.

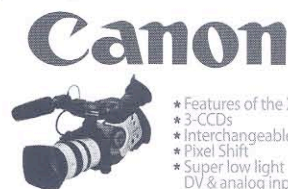
The fact is that cable, as it is now progressing, poses a serious threat to freedom of expression and to desirable diversity in the content of programs, because the cable system can become the sole communication source in a local community. The operator who has the right to pull the cutoff switch has the power, ultimately, to determine what we may see, hear and read. Another danger of unrestricted cable operating power is that cable can markedly widen the gap between the communication rich and the communication poor by not servicing unprofitable neighborhoods and classes of people.

Even though the vast majority of our cable systems still have only twelve channels, the time of the small cable operator



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Putting Communities First: Telecommunications Policy in the Public Interest

BY JUNE HOLLEY

As we discuss and debate what constitutes the public interest in the area of telecommunications development, it's useful to picture in our minds the thousands of low-income communities dotting our landscape, where people and organizations struggle daily to craft places where life is healthy, safe, and basic needs are met. These communities, whether in an urban ghetto or hidden in the hills of Appalachia, are like the canary in the coal mine—the damage they experience is a harbinger of worse to come for the entire society. Perhaps we can best approach issues of information access and equity by asking: how can telecommunications policy support the creation of healthy communities, and as it does this, help bring forth a healthy world?

We are talking here about transformation—rapid, basic change in our social landscape. We know that change can happen very rapidly. The last two decades of development in the telecommunications and information arenas are certainly an example of the breathtaking pace at which new technologies can stream through our society.

Most often change courses by us, seemingly out of our control, massive, undefinable. Yet the last decades have also seen extraordinary breakthroughs in our understanding of change processes. Scientists in many fields are developing the artful science of complex adaptive systems (including current trends in chaos theory), which describes transformative change in complex systems. However, very little of this understanding has been applied to the study of complex systems such as telecommunications and information infrastructure, let alone the structure of society as a whole. We urge policy makers to draw from the tremendous wealth of knowledge in this field as the basis for telecommunications policy truly in the public interest.

In human systems, the primary medium of transformation is relationships. Very simply put, the fastest way to produce beneficial change in a human system is to change who is relating to whom. Many of the problems with which we are

currently struggling are due to isolation and separation of groups and individuals from others who are different from them. The world is speckled with monocultures of people, and yet to spark the creativity needed to solve the problems facing us today, we must have social fields seeded with a broad diversity of perspectives, ideas, and experience.

We are convinced that we can generate tremendous positive change in a very short period of time by enabling people who don't normally interact, due to differences or distances, to begin dialogues that enable them to find common interests and organize joint projects. When we evaluate telecommunications policy we need to first examine whether the policy encourages these creative community-building processes. Putting communities first in the process of re-inventing our information infrastructure will lead to transformed and healthier communities and society.

Specific features of a communities-first telecommunications policy and process follow:

1 Telecommunications policy needs to support interactive processes that enable people in communities to experiment, create, and then continually improve what they have created.

(a) The information infrastructure needs to build on existing human networks anchored in neighborhoods and communities. It needs only to amplify, not create, these networks.

(b) It needs to link individuals in these communities to others in the community with whom they seldom interact as peers. Our experience has shown that when small groups representing broad spectrums of society – and always including people with low incomes – get together to design a new program or service, it's significantly more effective than any created by a single group.

(c) It needs to link communities to other communities around the world so that all have access to a thick portfolio of provocative ideas and nourishing resources.

2 Telecommunications policy needs to provide for facilitation of these creative processes. People anchored in the

community can link people with similar interests or needs and assist groups of people who are discussing an idea online or through interactive video to move it into implementation.

3 It needs to support learning processes. People who have accomplished something together must be encouraged to share their successes (and even more important, their failures) with others so that learning can occur rapidly and spread throughout the system.

4 It needs to link communities and the firms in them to new, emerging markets since the availability of jobs that are creative, engaging, and well-paying is the foundation of healthy communities. It needs to encourage schools, banks, social service agencies, and community groups to work collaboratively to design specific projects to support new job creation and firm expansion – through custom designed training programs, transitional support, access to capital programs, modernization programs, and marketing support. In this scenario, social and governmental services are no longer a stand-alone phenomenon that unwittingly fosters dependence, but a set of concrete, customized services to support people and firms transitioning into the mainstream economy.

5 Telecommunications policy needs to invest in communities, rather than establish a whole new set of rigidly defined and implemented government services. Transformative processes can occur in many different ways, and in the long term many of the processes can work on a market basis. Communities need to be supported as they develop information and communication systems that grow from their history and meet their needs—as they identify them. Communities need to be the ones designing the telecommunications system that serves their community. Telecommunications systems need to be customizable and capable of ongoing modification as the community changes and flourishes.

June Holley [june@acenetworks.org] is founder and president of the Appalachian Center for Economic Networks (ACEnet) in rural southeastern Ohio. Phone 740.592.3854, fax 740.593-5451.

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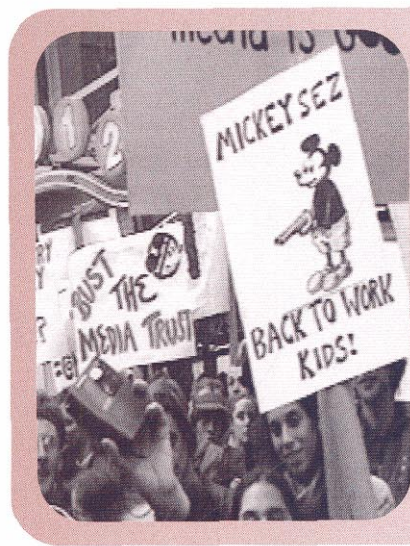
BY ROBERT W. MCCHESENEY

There are three striking features of the U.S. media system in the 1990s: concentration, conglomeration, and hyper-commercialism. Each of these is a long-term phenomenon accelerating throughout the 1990s that will likely continue well into the digital age. This astonishing degree of concentrated corporate control over the media is, in part, a response to the rapid increase in channels wrought by cable and satellite television. In this sense the corporate media giants are having a trial run for how they might dominate the Internet when it converges with digital television.

The conglomeration of media ownership began in recent decades. Media firms began to have major holdings in two or more distinct sectors, such as book publishing, recorded music, and broadcasting. This was fueled by a desire to create an extremely lucrative "vertical integration," where media firms not only produce content but also own the distribution channels guaranteeing places to display and market their wares.

Currently, a major form of vertical integration is the combining of film and television production with the ownership of cable channels, broadcast networks and stations, and movie theaters. We now are seeing the practice of "branding": cross-promoting and cross-selling media properties or "brands" across numerous sectors of the media that were not previously linked. Hence, if a media conglomerate had a successful motion picture, it could promote the film on its broadcast properties and then use the film to spin off television programs, musical CDs, books, and other merchandise. In the new world order of conglomerated media, the profit whole can be vastly greater than the sum of the profit parts. This process is often called "synergy." Ironically, the conversion of all media to a digital format has the effect not of putting an "iceberg" before the corporate media giants but, rather, making it easier and more profitable for them to work in several media sectors at once.

A look at Disney's recent operations shows how a media conglomerate



attempts to employ synergy. Its *Home Improvement* show is a big hit on its ABC television network. So Disney then has *Home Improvement* star Tim Allen take roles in Disney movies and write for Disney's publishing firms. The other giant media conglomerates are increasingly emulating this pattern. In another example, Disney takes its lucrative ESPN cable channel and uses the name to generate other properties. In 1998 Disney launched *ESPN Magazine* to compete directly with Time Warner's *Sports Illustrated*. Likewise, Disney is launching a chain of ESPN Grill restaurants to appeal to those who wish to combine sports with dining out.

If synergy makes becoming a media conglomerate more profitable and, indeed, mandatory, the other side of the coin is "branding." Media firms are racing to give their media properties distinct brand identities. Although the media system has fewer and fewer owners, it has a plethora of channels competing for attention. Branding is the primary means of attracting and keeping audiences while also offering new commercial possibilities. Cable channels and even broadcast networks each strive to be regarded as brands by the specific demographic groups desired by advertisers. Hence, Viacom's Nickelodeon cable network battles its new competition from News Corp.'s Fox Kids Network and the Disney Channel by incessantly hammering home the Nickelodeon brand name on

The hyper-commercialism of the system increases exponentially with the role of advertising. One effect of corporate concentration is that the media appear ever more willing and able to serve Madison Avenue. We are in the midst of what is little short of the commercial carpetbombing of our culture.

Nickelodeon, and in its other film, television, and publishing holdings. An example of the rise of branding to pre-eminence as a business strategy is News Corporation's HarperCollins book publishing division. In the past few years, HarperCollins has developed *The Little House on the Prairie* from the 1930s and 1940s into a contemporary book series aimed at 8-12 year olds, and has added several new books to the series. HarperCollins has also generated 90 related products, from paper dolls and cookbooks to picture books, all bearing the "Little House" logo.

The degree and pace of market concentration and conglomeration over the past 20 years is little short of breathtaking. In 1983, the first edition of Ben Bagdikian's seminal book, *The Media Monopoly*, chronicled how 50 firms dominated U.S. mass media, from newspapers, books, and magazines to film, radio, television, cable, and recorded music. In each of the four subsequent editions of the book, mergers and acquisitions reduced the number of dominant firms, until the 1997 edition put the figure at around 10, with another dozen or so firms rounding out the system. The 1990s have seen an acceleration of this process. The largest U.S. and global media firms like Time Warner, Disney, Viacom, and Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation have all doubled or tripled in size, through major acquisitions of other media firms as well

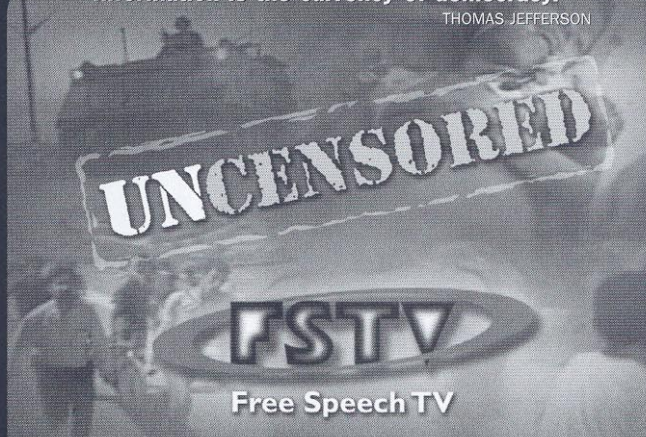


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Alliance for Communications Democracy



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as internal growth of existing assets. These firms have benefited from the relaxed regulatory standards in this era of “free market” capitalism, from new technologies that make consolidation more feasible and, especially from the immense profit potential that comes with size. There no longer exists the option of being a small or middle-sized media firm: a firm either gets larger through mergers and acquisitions or it gets swallowed by a more aggressive competitor.

But concentrating upon specific media sectors fails to convey the extent of concentrated corporate control, and the corporate media sector's linkage to the command posts of the capitalist economy. An inkling of this emerges when one addresses the holdings of the largest media corporations. Nearly all of the dominant firms in each of the major media sectors are owned outright or in part by the 20 largest U.S. media firms, and among those firms the largest half-dozen rule the roost. Time Warner, the world's largest media firm with 1997 sales of around \$25 billion, has holdings that rank it among the top few firms in film production, TV show production, cable systems, cable TV stations, broadcast TV networks, magazine publishing, book publishing, recorded music, amusement parks, and movie theaters. The other giants—Disney, Viacom, News Corporation, General Electric's NBC, TCI, Seagram's Universal Studios, CBS, and Sony—all have, or are in the process of building, similar arsenals. NBC, for example, is known to be interested in acquiring a film studio, while even giant Time Warner is rumored to be in the market for a major television network. As one media analyst puts it, “consolidation among distribution and content players rages on.”

This is not exactly the sort of blind, unfettered competitive market invoked by the likes of Jack Kemp. The leading media CEOs all meet annually at an invitation-only retreat in Idaho to discuss the future of their industry. Regardless of what actually happens in Idaho, these interactions bear many of the earmarks of a cartel, or at least a “gentleman's club.” And this barely begins to indicate how noncompetitive the media market is becoming. In addition to their oligopolistic market structure and overlapping ownership, the media giants each employ equity joint ventures with their “competitors” to an extraordinary extent. These are media

Television increasingly appears marinated in advertising and commercialism. As one advertising industry observer put it: “It should be noted that advertising clutter isn't confined to paid advertisements. From talk show hosts plugging their books to race car drivers wearing sponsor logos over every body part, clutter is everywhere.”

projects where two or more media giants share the ownership between them. They are ideal because they spread the risk of a venture and eliminate the threat of competition by teaming up with potential adversaries. Each of the eight largest U.S. media firms have, on average, joint ventures (often more than one) with five of the other seven media giants. Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. has at least one joint venture with every single one of them. While competition can be fierce in specific markets, the same firms are often the best customers for each other's products, and the overall effect is to reduce competition and carve up the media pie to the benefit of the handful of giants. According to most known theories of market performance, this degree of collaboration can only have negative consequences for consumers.

Looking at the membership on the U.S. media giants' boards of directors—the people who run the companies—the notion of this being a collaborative industry seems that much greater. Crawford's select six, less the Japanese Sony and adding CBS, have 81 directors on their boards. These 81 hold 104 additional directorships on the boards of Fortune 1000 corporations. Indeed, the boards for these six firms plus the five largest newspaper corporations (New York Times, Washington Post, Times Mirror, Gannett, and Knight-Ridder) have directors who also serve on 144 of the Fortune 1000 firms. The 11 media giants also have 36 “direct” links, meaning two people who serve on different media firm boards of directors and

also serve on the same board for another Fortune 1000 corporation. Each of the 11 media giants has at least two such interlocks. GE has 17 direct links to nine of the other 10 media giants; Time Warner has direct links to seven of them. In combination, this suggests that the corporate media are very closely linked to each other, and to the highest echelons of the corporate community. As a recent study of this issue concluded: “The media in the United States effectively represent the interests of corporate America.”

It is true that the system does produce much of value. In those areas that are especially commercially lucrative—sports, action films, business news, light comedies, celebrity coverage and certain types of popular music—the system is quite productive. For more affluent demographic groups, there is considerable choice within these genres, thanks to burgeoning growth in the number of media channels. Moreover, investors and advertisers tend to make lousy artists, so the media giants are required to utilize the talents of some very creative people, and in doing so some good material gets produced. But by its very nature the commercial system mitigates against creativity and has a difficult time establishing original commercially successful fare. It has 20-20 hindsight, always aping what has worked in the past or for competitors, and then recreating it without the initial creative spark. And the commercial system has no incentive to take time to develop audiences for new types of fare.

The hyper-commercialism of the system increases exponentially with the role of advertising. One effect of corporate concentration is that the media appear ever more willing and able to serve Madison Avenue. We are in the midst of what is little short of the commercial carpetbombing of our culture. The sheer number of television ads has increased considerably on broadcast television in the past decade. Nearly \$120 billion is being spent by advertisers on U.S. media in 1998, and around \$200 billion is being spent on U.S. advertising overall. Television increasingly appears marinated in advertising and commercialism. As one advertising industry observer put it: “It should be noted that advertising clutter isn't confined to paid advertisements. From talk show hosts plugging their books to race car drivers wearing sponsor logos over every body part, clutter is

McChesney

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everywhere." This commercial deluge is taking a toll. By one study, consumer "believability" in advertising dropped from 61 percent to 38 percent between 1987 and 1997.

The solution to the current problem of U.S. media demands political debate and reform. The reforms needed to democratize media in the United States would go directly against the corporate current. These include:

- ▲ applying antitrust to lessen or eliminate media concentration, vertical integration and conglomeration;

- ▲ establishing a fully funded and democratically accountable nonprofit and non-commercial radio and television sector, with local, regional and national stations and networks which would also provide the foundation for a public sphere in cyberspace;

- ▲ reinstating viable regulation of commercial broadcasters using the public airwaves, such as eliminating advertisements on children's and news programs;

- ▲ supporting any number of other measures to create a bolder and more aggressive journalism, including mechanisms to increase the power of working editors and journalists over the content of news rather than having those decisions ultimately be the province of investors, managers and advertisers; and, most important,

- ▲ establishing fully open, wide-ranging public hearings on the future of U.S. media. This means replacing the appallingly Telecommunications Act of 1996.

If in the future the United States makes having democratic media a priority, study and debate could probably determine a provocative range of reforms and alternatives that we debate and from which we could choose. At present, media control and support for a truly democratic public media system are not on the political agenda. This is the immediate core problem—the problem that is nowhere being addressed, much less solved.

Robert W. McChesney is president and co-founder of Free Press, a leader in the national media reform movement. He is Research Professor in the Institute of Communications Research at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. McChesney has written extensively on corporate media issues, including 13 books that he has either written or edited, the most recent of which is *The Problem of the Media: U.S. Communication Politics in the 21st Century*.

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Everett Parker

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has passed. Because of its high capital requirements, it seems inevitable that virtually all of cable will fall into hands of seven to 10 leading companies, who may also own most of the other telecommunication facilities in the United States. We must be prepared deal with that possibility in making communication policy.

It is fashionable in Washington, DC to wax lyrical about new telecommunications technologies and services, such as direct broadcasting from satellites, that are not even in place yet. Chairman Mark Fowler of the Federal Communications Commission and other industry partisans argue that the mere possibility of diversified sources of entertainment and information justifies the deregulation of those media that are now operative: telephones, broadcasting, cable and satellites. We are told, without on iota of proof, that marketplace forces will take over when regulation leaves off and that they will guarantee that the public interest will be splendidly served; because deregulation will foster widespread competition.

The fact is that, almost without exception, the businesses that are engaged in telecommunications already enjoy a monopoly and are reaching for market dominance. They want multiple ownership and cross ownership of broadcasting stations, cable systems, newspapers, telephone channels and computerized data bank. They are busily restructuring themselves, both vertically and horizontally, to control all phases of communication from the manufacture of hardware to the production and dissemination of programs. By opposing the Fairness Doctrine and equal time rights of political candidates, they are reaching for political control of access to the channels of communication.

One of the great dangers we face is that our whole communications system will fall under monopoly control, perhaps eventually under the control of one entity, the American Telephone and Telegraph company. After all, the wired nation is not in the future. Ma Bell has those wires into all of our homes right now.

For our very survival, we cannot let the government wash its hands of rational policymaking in the telecommunications and of oversight of the means of communication. The government is responsible for protecting the interests of the public and the integrity of our community life. But unless we move quickly to stop deregulation and to have consumer protection legislation passed, the communications revolution will take place with the American people as its victims rather than its masters.

It is late—but not too late—for the nation to take seriously the implications of the communications revolution and to debate them and make policy decisions. We need, particularly, to face up to the crucial issues that relate to the respective roles that industry and the public, through the government, can and will play in directing the development of electronic communication policy and facilities.

Our communication system is the crucial lifeline of our democratic institutions. It is the medium through which we maintain respect for the sanctity and equality of each person. Vital social issues that center in communication urgently require us to become advocates for the ethical principles we all claim to be guided by. Such advocacy is especially called for now before the Congress, the FCC and appropriate State and local policy makers. There is no substitute for speaking out.

Dr. Everett Parker, as founding Director of the Office of Communication of the United Church of Christ, is one of the founders of the modern media reform movement. Dr. Parker's pioneering work in challenging the FCC licensee qualifications of segregationist southern television stations formed the basis for the FCC's present-day civil rights jurisprudence. His best known achievement was challenging the license renewal of WLBT in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1964 because of their practice of discrimination against African American members of their own community—a victory which not only resulted in a change of ownership at the station, but most importantly, gave the public standing before the Federal Communications Commission.

Dr. Parker remains active in the civil rights movement and continues his tireless efforts as public interest advocate for democratic communication in mass media; he teaches courses in communication policy and ethics at Fordham University.

Cable Franchising: Notes on Creating Public Space

BY FRED JOHNSON

AT&T bought TCI for \$48 Billion. Whooooo! If there are any doubts we are witnessing the emergence of a new telecommunications era that should end them. We are in the midst of a merger-driven, technology-driven restructuring of telecommunications that makes the cable franchising gold rush of the late 70s and early 80s look like a yard sale.

Because the cable franchises of the first wave of franchising are now coming up for renewal it might be tempting to slip into linear thinking about the present using clichés of history 'repeating itself' or 'doing what we do best' or even worse 'keepin' on keepin' on'. To do so would be a dreadful mistake akin to wandering around with virtual reality goggles jacked into the 80s channel. The results would be some form of violent and unpleasant reorientation to the times.

The policy environment for cable franchising has changed drastically. Cable franchising initially represented a minor revision to U.S. telecommunications policy, wedging cable into a small space circumscribed by broadcasting and the telephone companies. Indeed many say the Cable Act of 1984, which signaled the closing of the first wave of franchising, represented little more than a deal brokered by Congress wherein the cable industry promised to stay out of the data and telephone transmission business in return for a reduction in the power cities held to regulate their rates. Perhaps an oversimplification but a useful one for knowing where things stand historically.

The passage of the 1996 Communications Act on the other hand is symptomatic of the most significant changes to take place in U.S. telecommunication since 1934. The hands-off, laissez-faire, policies of previous governments have been replaced by the current administration's dreams of 'Cybernetic Capitalism', a new phase of corporate restructuring in which microelectronics and information technology are deployed to completely reorganize the fabric of life.

Early cable franchising was about

Writer Gurney Norman often says, "sanity is knowing what story you are in." Well, the political story that cable access inhabits has changed to a much more complex tale. The successful and sane telling and acting out of that tale by activists and advocates requires a strategic understanding of the new story and where the public interest lies in it. If local advocates want to keep telling the stories of the 70s and 80s they may find themselves wandering mad in the howling information 'industreality' of the times.

opening television to broadband transmission, it was a prelude to the global changes we are now experiencing. The present wave of cable franchising is about integrating cable into the emerging global telecommunications infrastructure. These are changes tectonic in proportion. Telecommunications and information technology are the definitive infrastructure of the times. Like all infrastructure these technologies shift the basic dimensions of life. They dissolve boundaries between institutions, redefine public and private space; they change our fundamental notions of community.

Knowing What Story You Are In

Writer Gurney Norman often says, "sanity is knowing what story you are in." Well, the political story that cable access inhabits has changed to a much more complex tale. The successful and sane telling and acting out of that tale by activists and advocates requires a strategic understanding of the new story and where the public interest lies in it. If local advocates want to keep telling the stories of the 70s and 80s they may find themselves wandering mad in the howling information 'industreality' of the times.

Cable franchising is no longer simply about receiving television and access to television. It is now about how our communities are going to be organized in relationship to a global economy and culture. The outcome of this current round of cable franchising will be a significant factor in the creation of new kinds of

social space and time, new media, new economies, new kinds of organizations, new forms of money, new types of ownership, and new educational institutions.

Cities today are not so much places as processes embedded in the blackened rubble of the old industrial cities and rural areas. They now have different relationships to each other, linked as command and control nodes in distant geographies, globally connected and locally disconnected. Telecommunications makes it possible to 'blink out' regions and places by disinvesting, wiring around, and ignoring places that are not valued by the economic and spatial logic of the global economic system. This is the core problem cities are confronting in cable franchising now. What the economic and spatial logic of the system values is information technology and highly skilled and productive labor. If cities do not have those capacities they will be blinked out of the emerging system. This requires a sophisticated response by local advocates.

National deregulation has left local franchising as one of the few places citizens can still have a voice in telecommunications policy in the late 90s. Hopefully it will not always remain so, but for now local-regional telecommunication regulation and planning is one of the most significant buffers between our communities and the nearly unregulated global market. Suddenly local access advocates find themselves in a story where they and

local governments are about the only ones in their communities who have any experience. In order to be taken seriously by governments local activists are developing a big sense of purpose. In addition to their concern for local access channels it is now in their strategic interest to become advocates for the holistic concerns of their communities in the arena of telecommunications.

Again what are those interests? Cable franchises are now part of the answer to the fundamental question confronting cities, how will they 1) get the infrastructure in place to act in the global economy, and, 2) assist citizens in acquiring the skills and competencies to act effectively as citizens and do the information-intensive work of that economy.

A first step in that kind of civic sanity for local telecommunication activists has been to understand that nothing like sanity will come from focusing exclusively or predominately on cable access as a means to free expression. The public and government will not continue to fund *Boffo the Nasty Talking Clown* or the latest art school avant-garde video, crafted to outrage the bourgeoisie, unless they come with many other program and information flows connected to the real needs of communities. The only way free speech will survive on these channels will be as part of a larger vision of the potential for local communication to facilitate self-directed community development and self-definition for communities in the emerging global economy and culture.

Cable Franchises Are Processes Not Things

The cable franchising process is technically, legally defined by the Communications Act of 1996, and certainly it serves well to become acquainted with that process. It begins three years before the cable franchise expires and includes many formal procedures local governments must follow in order to work out the most advantageous position for its citizens. If local governments fail to follow these procedures it leaves their citizens vulnerable to the cable industry's bottom line thinking.

However, for local advocates that is only one moment in a social process which is really on-going. Cable franchising is ultimately about municipal and regional politics. The process of applying information technology to community



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development will do little to secure quality franchise provisions unless that work is done with an eye to creating strong community-based class and race alliances. Such alliances, which should cut across historical lines of division and onto city and county councils, are needed to assure government acts responsibly in franchise negotiations. For that matter in myriad other local telecommunication matters, as well.

The exact make-up of these alliances will vary from community to community but the outlines are clearly visible along what many are now characterizing as the 'digital divide'. [See *Losing Ground Bit by Bit*, from the Benton Foundation] As more and more of our governmental, political and cultural life takes place electronically, the social divisions born of poverty and race become wider, more insurmountable. This raises the stakes, populations excluded from using communication technology by poverty and culture will find their options for participating in society reduced overall. Anyone building local telecommunication coalitions starts here, with underserved and underrepresented people. From there the

outline extends to labor unions and churches, local nonprofits, grassroots groups, neighborhood associations, other community media organizations, community planning and environmental groups. There are no democratically successful franchises in the absence of some kind of community-based race and class alliance that made it that way.

But its not just about politics. It is also about technology. The process of cable franchising is one of becoming attuned to the current technical evolution of information technology and discerning how the capacity of the technology can serve democratic development in our communities. It's important not to lose sight of the role cable access advocates play in the franchising story. It is a role writer Andrew Ross characterizes as 'Radical Technologist.' A kind of movement that depends "...more upon pragmatic than utopian knowledge and, in accepting advanced technology as a condition of possibility, it rejects the technophobia that is deeply entrenched in the tradition of left cultural despair."

Technophobia appears to be driving some of the emphasis access activists are now placing on community development as a means to make access more relevant to community needs. Losing sight of the unique role 'radical technologists' can play in a community could be just as disastrous as remaining too focused on free expression, or becoming technophiles and ignoring community development politics. A wrong turn either way leaves access people to wander in the wilderness, rather than sited in their communities armed with pragmatic know-how, workable strategies and local tactics.

That means beginning to understand the story our communities are telling features a struggle to assure sufficient bandwidth to allow micro-businesses to work globally and a workforce with the information skills to carry out that business. Activists in this story join with the small businesses to fight for affordable telecommunication infrastructure and begin training programs designed to train underserved and marginal populations to get the jobs in the information economy. It means forging alliances with the labor unions in our communities who are grappling with unemployment and the politics of the workplace—labor unions that still represent significant political clout locally and whose ranks and vision are

beginning to grow again for the first time in years.

In this story cable access centers are evolving to become community centers of media culture, institutions that help communities understand and negotiate the cultural changes being imposed by the information economy. In this story media literacy and culture workshops are provided to allow communities to be effective parents and citizens in a media saturated home and workplace. Communication policy issues are framed and debated face to face, online, on video and interactively in these centers along with planning and zoning debates, local elections, community lectures and arts events.

The evolution of access centers now also includes computer labs for training and expression, Internet access, email and website access for Internet communication. Video could begin to be used once again as a process tool rather than only for making programs for cable channels. As a dance and movement education tool for example, or to create video documents for political organizing, and trigger tapes to stimulate discussion groups. Of course such centers could also become sources of technical assistance for nonprofit organizations in their efforts to participate in the emerging 'networked society'. Nothing aside from money is more urgently needed by the nonprofit community at this moment than "connectivity assistance" in integrating Internet communication into their work. Who else will provide these services? Who is more uniquely suited to play this kind of role in communities than access centers?

Tactics

Because the telecommunications landscape has become more complex and the stakes higher for communities, the franchising concerns of local activists are broadening out to encompass the issues that allow communities and community media centers to grow and evolve.

Affordable-cheap-free bandwidth is critical. It is no longer simply about how many access channels are available to the public. If centers are going to be able to expand into Internet access, digital media, job training, video conferencing and distance learning, bandwidth is key. That means the cable franchise provisions dealing with the Institutional Network are of increasing interest; it means the cable company must be committed to provide

In order to meet the needs of communities in these times, to help communities negotiate the cultural changes now taking place as a result of globalization, access centers have to take on a range of activities that go far beyond making programs for the access channels.

Internet services as part of their cable offering; it means access centers must have clear, dedicated digital capacity on the switched data networks being created in the upgrades of franchise renewals. Anything less will leave centers digitally marginalized.

Affordable digital bandwidth is also key for micro-economic development in our communities. If new jobs and new wealth are going to be created in communities in the current economy there must be a telecommunications infrastructure that features the following:

- ▲ Interactivity that links individuals to others and communities as peers
- ▲ Software Simplicity
- ▲ Hardware and Software Compatibility
- ▲ Linkage between individuals and firms in emerging markets
- ▲ Community-Driven design
- ▲ Allows people and organizations to engage in creative processes
- ▲ Low Cost
- ▲ Rights of Access

These are all issues for local activists. Each is critical for people who do not have jobs or are struggling to start small businesses. Each is critical to any community-based activity using telecommunications.

Non-cable related media

In order to meet the needs of communities in these times, to help communities negotiate the cultural changes now taking place as a result of globalization, access centers have to take on a range of activities that go far beyond making programs for the access channels. Many cable franchises now box centers in with missions too narrow for the needs of their communities. There is no good reason why community media centers can not use the resources provided by cable franchises to provide Internet access, do job training, provide production equipment for organizing, education and personal exploration that will never show up on a cable channel. All of these are communications-related activities desperately needed by community members. That is not to say

there should be no performance standards for access channel programming but only that access' role should not be limited to programming the channels by the franchise.

These are not utopian notions, these stories are taking place in community media centers all over the world now. And they are appropriate, sane responses to extremely challenging times. Changing and evolving, learning what story they are in, will be immeasurably easier for the U.S. centers, or more difficult, depending on how their communities define access and local telecommunications needs during their franchising process. Cable franchising is a high-stakes local telecommunications decision-making process in which local government has the power to set an important framework for the growth of communities. It behooves all to pay attention to how well local government is paying attention to these important responsibilities. If they are not we will all end up paying dearly.

Fred Johnson [fjohnson@mwg.org] directs the Community Media and Technology Program at UMass Boston's College of Public and Community Service www.cpcs.umb.edu/cmt. He is a founding member of Media Working Group Inc.

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Communications as a Tool of Democratic Community

**Alliance for Community Media International
Conference & Trade Show – Keynote Address
July 10, 1999, Cincinnati, Ohio**

BY PAT AUFDERHEIDE

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today to some of the people I take as my personal heroes, people who are carving out real opportunities for real people every single day, even when none of the hardware will cooperate.

You, my heroes, have decided, for whatever demented reason of your own, to assume the challenge of helping to inhabit the frontier region of television: noncommercial space. You have looked at one of the most powerful engines of capitalist accumulation in history and said, Oh thanks, I'd rather do the local cricket match. And I'll take the zoning commission. Oh, yeah, and the guy with the hygiene problem.

Just thought I would let you know that I'm not totally romanticizing the task here.

But really: it's an important and guaranteed-to-be-unappreciated thing to create noncommercial television. Most of us think we know what "television" is: way-too-predictable commercial TV. But more people than ever before are subscribing to cable. And they are about to find out that they don't really know what "television" is anymore, because the paradigm that we've all been waiting to change for so long finally is changing.

You are a big part of our hope that, as we stand on the so-called cyberfrontier, and everybody's doing land grabs, there will be electronic, imaginative public domains out there. That people are given the chance to use the new possibilities, not just be used by them.

If there are open spaces, public domains, public conversations, it won't be thanks to any of the major players. As you know, the period of greatest uncertainty is coming to an end. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 for better and for worse created enough of a regulatory structure for us to see dimly into the near future.

That future will be—here's a big surprise—controlled by a few major corporate actors. It will be a communications universe that is much more about networking, at least in its infrastructure, than about mass media. But it will look and feel much more like mass media than it needs to. The biggest actors will be doing their best to take advantage of the power of networking—especially to harvest as much data as they can from all of us—at the same time as they do their best to minimize the advantage to us of the same power. Why? Because they're not stupid. They love the benefits of old media—the gatekeeping, the collection points, the old way of aggregating audiences for advertisers, of limiting consumer choice, of creating enough monopoly power to allow them to relax into their profits.

Still, even if the big players succeed in narrowing our options, they are facing the challenge of playing the game a little differently. With interactive TV, with Internet-based communication, with

linked technologies, people have more opportunities to select, or deselect, to discover or to exclude, to confront or to escape, even to develop alternative communications networks, than they ever have had. So now, the game is cultivating and grooming and shaping and creating something that the old guys call audience, and that you call community.

I have a brilliant friend, Neil Seiling, who produces avant-garde TV, and who was talking to me about the problems of programming now. He said that in the emerging media universe, the one basic rule will be simple: "Whoever gets the audience, wins."

This is much harder for them than before, when the big actors in media just divided the captive audience, and when the providers of plain-vanilla, POTS type phone service rented everybody the same black box. Getting an audience: that'll be the challenge. They're still not quite sure how they're going to do that, but they know that it takes a lot more than recycling programming and blasting it out into the void. They're going to try on at least two fronts: keeping you on their farm, no matter what they will eventually grow there; and making you the milk cows. About the farm part: They talk earnestly about "branding"—establishing a presence that people trust and turn to, a Disney presence, a Microsoft presence, an NBC presence, and so on. They're serious about using every new communications resource to shore up the existing mental real estate they've got, and they want and need to colonize more.

They are also very serious about building databases. And that's the milk cow part. I hear that the Disney folks are storing away the information they get when kids register on their site, banking it for future use. And I was amused to read in last week's *Advertising Age* that marketers are designing cute little icons that people with state of the art computers and Internet access can click on to get trivia games and mini-shows. Virgin Atlantic has an Austin Powers icon that you toggle on to play a trivia game—if you first give them some information on your travel habits. "At the end of the day, it's all about data collection," the marketing manager for Virgin Atlantic said.

I think that you guys have a solid institutional base of experience that gives us much better models than an Austin Powers travel toggle-show or a Disney marketing database for what you can do with sophisticated, interactive communications. Look at Davis, California, where the access cable people and the community computing people joined forces to shape interactive electoral coverage, so that Davis citizens asked the questions they needed answers to and got substantial news coverage too. Look at CAN-TV in Chicago, which has nurtured and sheltered a growing public space for labor issues. Look at Covington, Kentucky, where the Media Working Group helped teach artists from throughout the region how to use new technologies. Just as interesting, MWG is creating a virtual gallery opening that creates another open, public electronic space, and is fearlessly tinkering with it to see what works and what doesn't.

Elections, labor issues, grassroots arts—that's not just what

commercial TV doesn't do well, but the kind of television that only exists as a feature of living community. Throughout the Alliance community, you've figured out what many terrified people in commercial TV are just beginning to grasp: it's about facilitating human relationships, not about the technology. The difference between you and the folks in commercial TV, of course, is about what kinds of human relationships you want to facilitate.

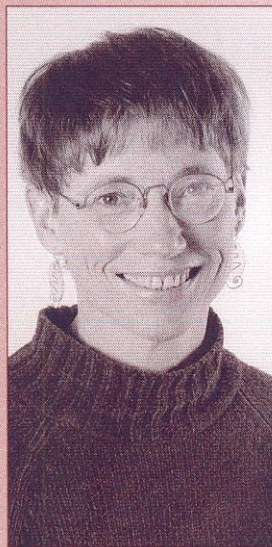
I know that on an average day, when the equipment is down or downright defunct, it may seem that, in fact, it is about the technology. But take a moment to imagine our near future. You may not always be get-me-the-duct-tape tech wizards. Even today we need to know much, much less about how our complex equipment works than we did a decade ago, and there's never been so much space to fill.

The coming challenge will be creatively shaping uses, building links, helping to cultivate imaginations that have been stunted by years of learning, from all of commercial TV, never to dream of alternatives. At the same time, I don't mean that people aren't being offered captivating, well-produced entertainment by our commercial culture. To the contrary, it's the most astonishing concentration of human creativity ever in the history of the world. To do what you can do well, you don't have to learn to reject the awesome, amazing, incredibly fecund popular culture that has given us great movies like *The Empire of the Sun* and great TV like *The Sopranos* and musicians like Ry Cooder and—well, I'm using my list, and you have your own.

But shouldn't people be able to imagine, and want something more or different? Communications is after all the vehicle by which we understand what's important in the world and for ourselves. God help us if it's all about the little Budweiser frogs, cute as they are and good as they are for the Anheuser-Busch family and stockholders.

What you're good at, and what we need more of, is encouraging people to be able to imagine communications not just as a fount of entertainment, good or bad, but as a tool for community in its most democratic aspect. And I mean community not as a smug haven from heartless consumerism, a cozy little pre-color *Pleasantville*, a chunk of consensus

behind a picket fence. I mean community as the shared space where differences are negotiated and common problems are solved. I mean community in the sense that our great philosopher John Dewey used the word "public," the part of our lives that we share by force of circumstances and that we inhabit best when it's maintained, in part with the tools of communication. I mean the unglamorous but absolutely necessary business of a civ-



Elections, labor issues, grassroots arts—that's not just what commercial TV doesn't do well, but the kind of television that only exists as a feature of living community. Throughout the Alliance community, you've figured out what many terrified people in commercial TV are just beginning to grasp: it's about facilitating human relationships, not about the technology. The difference between you and the folks in commercial TV, of course, is about what kinds of human relationships you want to facilitate.

ilized democracy.

In many ways, the Internet has been a tremendous gift to us in that endeavor, not just because of what the technology permits, but because of the way it grew up, with so many useful civic and community services were among the pioneering applications. It was a rare example of communications that had a highly visible early life as a noncommercial, open-to-everybody kind of thing.

The interactive era is also a terrific boon to those of us who care about creating civic culture because, let's face it, television as a mass medium is not the most natural, the most user-friendly medium for grassroots communication and community building. It has great advantages, but terrible disadvantages too. It is a technologically intense, resource hog of a medium. There are big technical hurdles to overcome, and they just get worse with obsolescence. And there are huge cultural hurdles to overcome, most particularly the stunted-imagination problem. Put another way, this is the fact that those new trainees all "know" what television is when they walk in the door.

As the TV set starts to look and act less like a traditional, top-down TV set and more like a computer screen or a video conference call, it's going to be that much easier to free up imaginations to use the technologies that are becoming easier to use for noncommercial, civic and community purposes.

And you are the people who've got the experience in how to do that. You have the names and numbers of the nonprofit

community groups. You know how to drive the cable company and the city council crazy until they do what they should. You have the beginnings of the social imagination to inhabit electronic public domains.

You also know how many people around you don't have a clue about what they would like to do with their new opportunities. That's an old problem for anyone who's worked on democratic communications issues, we're not confused about why we have it, and it's not going to be any cheaper than it ever was to address it, just because we have new technological opportunities. Because however expensive telecom technologies are, the most expensive thing is the cultivation of human creativity and connection. That's not just about training, although that's a part of it. It's about investing in people and community over the course of a life cycle.

One of the things that makes me maddest in the whole access story is how easy it has been for conservatives to argue that culture doesn't need subsidy. It's the way they've gotten many decent taxpayers to dismiss a core part of a civilized society—

Community Access to Dominant Media

Public access centers have a critical role to play in the evolution of communities, and in the ways that communication occurs in the community's daily life. Fundamental changes are occurring in the way in which we share information, thoughts, visions and dreams.

The foundation for public access television is strong and well laid. But it is not good enough. We shouldn't build our entire house on a single foundation. We must plan for additions based on community needs and lay foundations for those.

And try not to get caught in the growth trap of institutions. Institutions, remember, are often bastions that retard and inhibit change. We must champion change and accommodate its aberrations. We must attack technology to break it down to its simplest components and make it available to anyone.

Dirk Koning, from a 1990 article in CMR announcing the creation of the Community Media Center in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

as if they expected anything else in their social lives to run well if there were no investment in it. They don't expect the sewers to be maintained out of sheer love of common plumbing, or the highway signs to be crafted by a volunteer committee of sign lovers. Community TV, community networking, grassroots arts, community communication takes not just skill and work and love, but sustained resources, so that institutional memories can be built up, political relationships can be groomed, leaders can find each other, people can learn from their mistakes.

And that all takes money.

We've lived through a terrible transition. Access started in an era of generous but careless social welfare liberalism. As that era declined, access weathered a brutal period of vulgar and also sophisticated assaults on anything that would impede the "greed is good" philosophy. We are now, post-Telecom Act, all living in a more sober era, in which very big and powerful companies are taking on challenging new business arrangements and offering untested services, such as widespread broadband access. Those companies have been permitted to get very big so that they can take very big risks. As they do so, they need to be made to invest in the future of the society that will need their services. And sometimes they have.

Look at what happened in California, when Pacific Telesis and SBC merged. Thanks to more than a hundred community groups working together, the California Public Utilities Commission required that the new merged company invest in shrinking the digital divide. In Ohio, the Public Utilities Commission also succeeded in extracting funds from merged companies Ameritech and SBC for community initiatives.

Those are great examples, because they show what can happen when community-based organizations work on and with government agencies to harness the energy of the new era in telecom. They are also chastening examples, because the dollar figures are only in the millions, and there are several decimal points more of investing to do in community networking.

The feds have also earmarked teensy tiny packets of money—\$10 million from the Department of Education, \$17 million from the Department of Commerce's TIIAP. And of course, there are many, many small, do-good demonstration projects by large communications companies

looking both for good publicity and some smart new ideas on how to design the new networked universe. The Open Studio art project for instance, was funded by Microsoft and AT&T among others.

These are promising precedents, and it's still so little for such a vast, rich country. It's far too little. We are in terrible trouble in this country if we think that small demonstration projects can make up for systematic deprivation.

So let me recap my main points here:

▲ The networked environment offers more potential than ever before to actually do what we say access can do: make communications a tool of democratic community.

▲ The megacorporations that were the winners after the Telecom Act are ferociously working to shape that environment in their favor.

▲ You have unique tools and experience, at this moment, to help shape civic and public domains.

But there is no free lunch. We need to challenge our legislators and regulators at every level to see subsidies for culture and noncommercial communication as a critical investment in a civilized, democratic future. We need to show them that we have approaches, we have answers, we have resources that are all the more worth investing in because they address needs that will never ever be answered efficiently, effectively, or appropriately in the marketplace. And when I say we, I don't mean just the good people of the Alliance for Community Media. People in all kinds of organizations in every community need to make these arguments for the funds to cultivate a truly civil society.

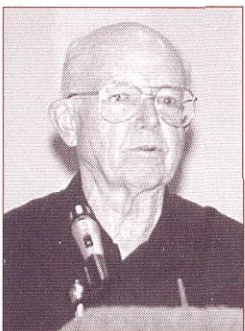
You need to stop being my unsung heroes. It's too damn hard. Let's go for being pioneers of the newest public domains, with the citizenry as social investors in this adventure.

Thank you.

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Pat Aufderheide is a professor in the School of Communication at American University, and directs the Center for Social Media there. The Center for Social Media (centerforsocialmedia.org) showcases and analyzes strategies to use media as creative tools for public knowledge and action. It focuses on social documentaries for civil society and democracy, and on the public media environment that supports them. Its newest project, launched in 2005, is the Public Media ThinkTank, which stimulates and showcases approaches to public media in the digital era.

The Essential George Stoney



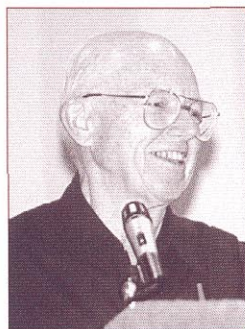
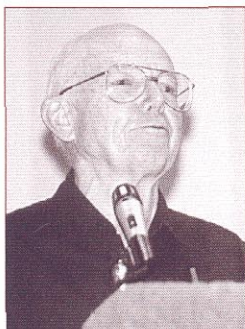
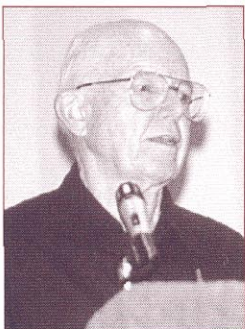
When Rika Welsh edited the 25th Anniversary edition of CMR in 2001, she contacted George Stoney for his thoughts on what the issues of concern might be at this point in our evolution. He responded with seven clear and important areas that were most pressing from his perspective. And they are:

First, the 'first come, first served non-discriminatory assignment of time and facilities' needs to be examined in light of our quarter of a century.

As early as 1972, when Red Burns and I worked with Nicholas Johnson, the lone "green" member of the FCC, to craft the language for the provision of access in cable franchises, the concept of "first come, first served" was fundamental to ensuring that all users would be treated equally. We were also borrowing from the experience of the "Challenge for Change" program with the Canadian National Film Board, where I had been guest executive for the years 1968-70. With advice from Brian Owen, at the Cable Television Association, we designed the first access apprentice project that was to begin in 1973. Now, almost three decades later, we have a wealth of experience to help us to reconsider the challenges and shortcomings in implementing this concept. On the whole, "first come, first served" has been a strong bedrock from which to build policies, but there have been problems. Perhaps the most troubling has been the amount of resources in time, training expense and millions of hours of channel space that have been carelessly utilized by thoughtless self-indulgence users—behaving a bit like naughty kids in the back of the room, wasting everyone else's time who are there to get an education.

Yes, "first come, first served" is as fundamental to access as "one person, one vote" is in our concept of democracy. Yet no one would accuse me of interfering with a neighbor's democratic rights if I tried to persuade him/her to use the vote more responsibly, or even vote for my party. They can ignore me, but I may also have the power to change their minds.

But the question arises, what happens when this "power to persuade" rests in the hand of access managers whose job it is to implement the policies that determine time slots and equipment allocations. There's the rub. Compare us with the public librarians or the people setting curriculum for our public schools. They continually make choices. They do so according to what they think is for the "good of the community." Yes, they listen to majority voices, and also to the minority. They assume the burden of leadership. Thirty-odd years of experience have indicated that we must take similar responsibility and chances. We also need to assume a role of leadership, making the necessary choices for the "good of the community," while leaving considerable open space for all to



participate, even for the people whom we think irresponsible.

SSecond, we need to redefine what we mean today by "community." Originally "community" was limited to the territory covered by the individual franchise, and included only those who subscribed to cable, generally a relatively small percentage of the inhabitants. Right from the beginning we were all dissatisfied with this limitation. We strove to use this window of opportunity, which Nick Johnson had helped us define, to train people and to use equipment to make tapes that could be shared with a wider group. We "bicycled" tapes from franchise to franchise. We had community screenings. We became aware, quite early, that just as important as serving that immediate community, many producers wanted to reach out to another "community of interest" and a wider audience with the issues they were exploring. The anti-Vietnam War groups, the ecology groups, and church congregational groups had an interest in sharing their ideas and reaching right across the country. In the early '80s DeeDee Halleck and the Paper Tiger collective found ways to use satellite connections to make this possible. A much larger definition of "community" was born.

Meanwhile some of our more technically accomplished leaders and pioneers (Dirk Koning in Grand Rapids, Anthony Riddle in Manhattan, Drew Shaffer in Iowa City, Sean McLaughlin on Maui, and many others) have gone boldly forth, God bless them, and further expanded our distribution territory by cablecasting (streaming) onto the web. This is taking us to the full actuation of the "simultaneously local and global" potential of the new technologies.

With this expansion of distribution capabilities and therefore the "communities" we serve, the question arises about the allocation of resources on the local level. Many access centers have rules that prohibit use by anyone not a resident of the immediate franchise area. Perhaps some attention needs to be given to these policy limitations in light of our need to remain a meaningful resource to the larger movement for media democracy.

TThird, and perhaps most difficult, we need to find strategies to deal with conflicts arising from the use of time and facilities by individuals with entrepreneurial intent.

Here I may be overly influenced by my close observation of access as it has developed in Manhattan. Some egregious situations are easily spotted: the psychics who give their phone numbers and, after the live show is over, charge callers for advice. A popular talk show host who took equipment to New Jersey to visit his auto dealer and had

A Call for Submissions to Community Media Review

The summer 2005 issue of *CMR* will focus on "Media Literacy as a Tool for Social Change." We are inviting individuals and organizations to submit media literacy examples, exercises, case studies, stories and articles about how Media Literacy is used for social change. Please think visual, not just theoretical. Send us graphics, cartoons, illustrations, digital photos, even video examples. We want to create an issue of *CMR* where people will not only think differently about Media Literacy, but use the issue in practical ways with community-based organizing, in classrooms, homes, and movement building work. If you make us laugh there may be a prize in it for you.

Deadline for submissions is July 15. Contact Belinda Rawlins at rawlins@aa.edu or Jeff Smith at jsmith@grcmc.org with questions or ideas.

him on camera explicitly peddling his stock? Executive Director Anthony Riddle with the MNN non-commercial policies in hand, had a clear mandate to suspend him for a year.

But rigidly strict observance of the non-commercial policies to the point of being anti-entrepreneurial might have eliminated some of my favorite shows. For example, what about the literary talk show who interviews authors and professors about their new books? Surely the guest is "peddling his wares," even advertising the reputation of his university. The publisher is getting for free what they pay a fortune for every Sunday to advertise in *The New York Times*. Or, what about a woman who has a show on genealogy? Her business is helping people trace their family connection. I have learned a lot listening to her. I know this is her profession, she is building her clientele of private clients, who will be paying her a fee. Is this advertising or helpful and thought provoking information?

Yet another example is a show called *Birth Balance*, a continually intriguing weekly program about midwifery, natural childbirth, and water birthing? It often shows graphic, and quite beautiful and explicit scenes of birth. I don't think we have had a single complaint about its content. But I know the woman who makes the program also sells the tapes. She is in the hire of professional groups, advocating her practices. Should we be eliminating her? Again is it commercial or informational?

A harder call: some teenagers from Harlem have a weekly fashion show. Shop owners and designers are frequent guests. They don't put up the addresses of their stores or their phone numbers. Viewers are familiar with them from the neighborhoods. It is a very positive show for all. But people are financially involved. Would we discover that the producers are charging guests for the chance to present their wares, or are receiving gifts in exchange? Anthony would be within his rights to interfere. But should he?

And finally, what about the PR firms and consultants for national nonprofits organizations, like the Heart Association, or the YW and YMCAs, who are providing fundraising materials to the locally-based chapter of their organizations. They may suggest the addition of original material at the local level, but most of the time the locally-based chapter or nonprofit lack the time, training and staff to do this.

Those PR advisors are making money. The local organization is getting free fundraising outreach, using the community's channels. Is there a conflict?

I have raised many of the questions, I wish I had some answers. I do feel it is important for us to address these quandaries in a consistent fashion. There is a need to have discussion about the implications from which we can develop a clear set of guidelines to support those in the field who face these difficult decisions, often without the experience to fully understanding the consequence of their solutions. We can assist them, and should—based on our 30 years of experience. Let's use it.

Fourth, we need to redefine and reconsider "volunteerism," drawing on our long experience over time, what can be accomplished by unpaid community members and what needs to be facilitated by paid staff.

In the early days of the '70s, we were all fired up with wonderful ideals about community. I can still feel the thrill, and it makes me nostalgic. But looking at it more soberly, now years later, I realize that every movement eventually fails unless quite early on there is continuity, and this usually means a small cadre of paid people. Churches have realized this. None would have survived without paid staff. Libraries were started and run for many years by volunteers, but those that survived had to eventually ask for and get community financial support.

Thanks to our beginning when, even the early NYU cable access interns were receiving small fees, we have understood the need for paid staff. Some local access efforts lived for a time on nothing but volunteer effort. Inevitably, however, people's lives changed, their priorities changed. Had there not been some staff continuity, each time the supporters dropped out, someone would have had to start all over again. The challenge is to keep things in balance, and the question we face most often now is "when should staff people be involved in production?" If we play "hands off" and newly trained volunteers are left on their own, only the technically adept survive. Often people with the greatest need to speak get lost.

Experience has guided a lot of access managers to find sensible compromises. But dare we draw up rules? Don't local differences call for different solutions?

How can we find flexibility yet remain effective to the obligation that our commitments in the cable franchise call for? I have observed literally dozens of access coordinators with experience who have found their own good directions. But again, we need to provide consistent guidelines. The NFLCP, and later the Alliance, has had an important role to play here. It must continue to create the forum where discussion about the implications of such policies is encouraged, and the best solutions are examined. This is an ever-changing challenge of what we do for and with our communities. The dangers of not fully understanding the long term ramifications of these decisions have proven to be very damaging in many communities over the years.

We have been extraordinarily fortunate that so many experienced access professionals have been willing to remain in their communities, become rooted members of it, have families on very low pay, and are still with us. We should celebrate them more often. We really need to listen to their leadership on these issues.

Fifth, we need to reconsider our mission in light of the developments around new technology like the Internet.

More and more of us are thinking of our organizations as at the hub of community communication, however broadly this may be defined. A lot of access centers today look very different from ones we have known in the past. Some models, like the wonderful Community Media Center in Grand Rapids, Michigan, have designed facilities to serve community radio, have computer labs and mobile training vans, as well as live screenings and concerts that may, only incidentally, have a connection with what is seen in the channels. Brooklyn Public Access, like many access facilities now, has a training center to teach people how to design their own websites or job skill training for which they charge a pittance compared to what private schools charge. More need to do this, but it can't happen without thought being given to sources of financial support other than (or in addition to) franchise fees. This leads to:

Sixth, we need to find ways to encourage a wider community support for our access centers as valuable community resources akin to the status of public libraries.

In all too many places we have

A lot of access centers today look very different from ones we have known in the past. Some models, like the wonderful Community Media Center in Grand Rapids, Michigan, have designed facilities to serve community radio, have computer labs and mobile training vans, as well as live screenings and concerts that may, only incidentally, have a connection with what is seen in the channels.

depended so largely on the cable franchise fees that we haven't had to think beyond, to other ways our organizations can build upon this base of operational support. The boards of directors in our centers need to accept their role in the long term financial planning for their organization.

Expansion of funding through grants is not the solution. It is important to realize that grants come with additional project commitments often adding to the scope of work to be accomplished within the existing staffing of a center. Grants, while an important way to add to scope of services a center may provide to the community, are most effective when they create collaborations between community institutions. They can successfully embellish the role of the access center as a catalyst to bring people together and to expand the ways in which media and technology can be used in support of collaborative efforts, be it in schools or in government or for the improvement of community.

I hate to beg. I hate the whole process of grant writing, of courting the representatives of foundations. But it is a necessary part of grant writing. Fundraising through grants, in my experience, can't be left to the professionals, however skilled they may be as grant writers. I don't think we have ever received substantial funding without personal connections. This means the allocation (investment) of resources (staff) to accomplish any meaningful financial growth. Ultimately, of course, we may lose our long cherished claims on the cable companies. But the stronger the role of the access center within the community, the more it is valued through the outcomes it creates for the city and its residents, the harder it will be for it to disappear. New Bush appointments to the FCC and the Supreme Court are shadowing our future. We've got to begin making changes.

Seventh, we need to develop one or more centers for staff training which would also be a place where the concepts and ideals of access could be fostered, debated, nurtured and referenced in archives. Leadership development is the key concept.

Back in the early 1970s, NYU Alternate Media Center was doing exactly this. Co-founder Red Burns worked with me with full-hearted support for four years. Then she was wise enough to know that NYU's costs were too high to be of service to most people. She saw a mission for the Alternate Media Center in the fast developing technologies and mastered their intricacies herself. With massive support from industry (and they have certainly profited from the training opportunities themselves), she has made the Interactive Telecommunications center one of NYU's "crown jewels" and has been much honored herself in the process. But our little band of cable access pioneers were left adrift.

Around the country efforts were being made to fill the gap. Over the years NFLCP/Alliance members have emerged with skills as trainers and have set up some interesting courses and training initiatives, but we still lack places with a solid base of funding to meet this need.

I think we need leadership development with dialogue about the long-term direction and the establishment of planning guidelines for centers.

I hope this will happen soon.

Certainly we need to "spread the gospel" (my background and habits of thought shape my words long after the faith has vanished). If we are loyal to one another and our almost foolhardy utopian dream, I believe we will survive and do well.

George Stoney is a professor of film at New York University and a board member for Manhattan Neighborhood Network.

Basic Principles: Maintaining the Foundation of PEG Access in a Changing World

BY SUE BUSKE

As a new millennium dawns, it is appropriate to explore ways to help assure that the basic principles upon which PEG access was founded are maintained. At the same time it is essential for PEG access advocates to recognize and use new media tools and new technologies, just as we must recognize and address changes in the communities served by our media access centers. If the public's right to access the electronic media is to be maintained and hopefully expanded, access staff, board members, elected officials, access producers, and community media activists must conduct the "business" of PEG access in a way that reflects both the basic principles upon which public access was created and the changes in technology and in our communities.

1 Build partnerships—collaborate. It is absolutely essential to the future of PEG access that access organizations become smart about the importance of partnering and collaborating with the local government, schools, community organizations, local business, and the local cable service provider(s). These partnerships help assure that the community media center becomes an institution within the area. They are also necessary to assure that the funding necessary to deliver vital community media services will continue to be available on a long-term basis.

2 Remember that access is about more than making a TV show. PEG access is about media literacy and free speech. It's about localism and "globalism." It is about providing a voice to those who rarely, if ever, are heard. It is about ensuring a diversity of viewpoints and ideas. It is about helping people figure out how to "sift" through the din and media overload that they have to deal with on a daily basis. It is about having one or more outlets for distribution of the electronic message, the media tools and skills to prepare the message, help (if needed or wanted) in preparing the message, and a place to go that has people who support

...it is essential for PEG access advocates to recognize and use new media tools and new technologies...

each other and recognize the importance of every person's right to speak and be heard.

3 Embrace new media tools (but don't forget the basic principles). It seems that hardly a week goes by before we hear about another access television center that changes its name to "community media center" to reflect a new and expanded mission. The term "community media access center" is far more reflective of the type of media services that are needed in most communities. Such change is good—it reflects a recognition that technological changes are happening all around us on a daily basis. It is such a name change that draws attention to the fact that community media access centers recognize the need to embrace the new tools and make them available to citizens and community groups, based upon the same principles that have guided the development of access television for nearly 30 years.

4 Get smart politically. The future of PEG access depends upon the ability of access leadership in every community to realize and act in a manner that recognizes that PEG access/community media exists in a political world. Access needs the support of elected officials and city staff as well as the community. Building support for PEG access is a political process and it must be approached as such. Unfortunately, PEG access is often marginalized by those who don't understand it; those who want the needed access resources to be allocated for other purposes; those who are threatened by the concept of the public actually having the opportunity to speak; or those who fear that they will somehow lose some level of control if PEG access exists or is successful. Community media leaders

must be politically smarter than they have ever been in the past.

5 View the franchise renewal process as an opportunity—not as a threat.

Over the past several years some leaders within the PEG access field have viewed the cable franchise renewal process as a threat to the future of PEG access. In fact, franchise renewal is an opportunity for community media leaders, local government agencies, civic and community groups, and local businesses to move from the old cable TV world to a community media world. It is a chance to undertake a community communication planning process. Such a process, if approached in a collaborative and proactive fashion, can and has led to remarkably positive outcomes for communities and the media access centers that provide services to them. All of us should recognize and celebrate the fact that many communities who have had no or anemic PEG access in their communities prior to the franchise renewal process are seeing well-funded community media access organizations and good production facilities starting up or evolving as a result of the cable franchise renewal process.

6 Access centers need to become community institutions. In order to be taken seriously, PEG access needs to become considered a community institution, like a library or a school. Access is not some local "special interest" group that vies for funding with all the other special interests groups. A community media access center is an institution that provides services to all in the community who need noncommercial media assistance. The degree to which the media access center can provide those services is directly related to the level of funding and resources available. The level of funding and resources is often directly reflective of the ability of PEG access leaders to develop collaborations, embrace new media tools, be politically smart, effectively serve and organize the community, and view franchise renewal as a opportunity—not as a threat.

Sue Buske [sue@buskegroup.com] is president of The Buske Group, Sacramento, CA.

The Praxis of Access:

Access and Global Activism

BY JOHN W. HIGGINS

The 1920s & 1930s. Around the world, media-visionaries struggle toward a dream involving a relatively new media outlet: radio. The vision sees radio devoted to shared communication among people, rather than a one way transmission device for selling commercial products held by a few companies. In Germany, Bertolt Brecht reflects the vision, stating “Radio could be the most wonderful public communication system imaginable . . . could be, that is, if it were capable not only of transmitting but of receiving, of making the listener not only hear but also speak, not of isolating him but of connecting him.” The global movement is but a recent manifestation of grassroots-oriented, democratic media. In the U.S., the general population shares the belief that radio should stay commercial-free — dominated by the educators and non-profit groups who developed the new medium. The commonly held perspective sees radio as a tool to uplift and unify the nation’s people, rather than an instrument of crass commercialism. The movement builds on the work of radical film makers and photographers, struggling against domination of information by the mainstream film industry.

The 1940s & 1950s. In the U.S., struggles to utilize media technologies for non-commercial, grassroots communication focus on the emerging technologies of FM radio and broadcast television. Across the globe, community-based radio stations emerge, based on local social movements. In 1947 the tin miners’ union in Bolivia starts broadcasting from a chain of stations in the mountains. Over the years, the miners defend their stations from a variety of threats—including government troops attempting to shut down the miners’ voice. In 1949, community radio is born in the U.S. in the form of progressive KPFA in Berkeley, California during an era of anti-communist hysteria and government repression. Soon after, the Pacifica network is born.

The 1960s & 1970s. The options for democratic, grassroots media expand to include the emerging technology of

portable video equipment for the creation of community-based programs. Those testing the limits of the new medium include activists, artists, and long-standing community-based documentary film groups. Experiments with the new medium take place, among other places, in Britain, Mozambique, France, Chile, and the U.S. Canada’s success with using film and video for social change, the “Challenge for Change” program, is noted by activists intent on adapting technology to the purpose of progressive social change.

At this same time in the U.S., the 20-year-old technology of cable television is moving from rural to urban areas, providing a window of opportunity for the distribution of community-based communication. An unusual alliance of cable company executives, media activists, and government regulators forges an agreement that will open the door for community television channels—known as “access channels”—for public, educational, and governmental use.

The social environment of the late 1960s and early 1970s cultivates the sense that social institutions are ineffective and a centralized broadcast media are particularly culpable in perpetuating social inequities. Cable television is cast as a technology that will help bypass centralized control of information, and provide alternative sources of information and opinion to an information-starved public. Access channels will help the de-centralization of information and authority, and reinvigorate the social fabric of the republic—developing an involvement in the workings of the democracy at the grassroots level. This is to happen by including everyday people in the creation of television programs and the discussion of current events of significance to the community certain to be the focus of these programs.

Within this social environment emerges the Alternate Media Center, created by George Stoney and Red Burns, and fed by the accumulated knowledge of the “Challenge for Change” program and similar experiments involving media for

social change from around the world over the decades. One program of the Alternate Media Center places interns with cable companies across the U.S., to utilize access channels and develop facilities that will become neighborhood meeting centers, based around community media.

These interns, in the parlance of the development discourse, become “animators”—“social animators”—“change agents.” They foster structures and practices based on group-held interpretations of representative democracy. They share a vision of a more equitable society run less from the centralized positions of corporate and governmental power; and more from the grassroots—where everyday people have more of an impact on their day to day lives and the direction of the human race.

By the mid 1970s, the interns soon find themselves accompanied by a growing number of interested individuals and groups intent on using media as a tool with which to change society. These social and media activists form an organizing group, the National Federation of Local Cable Programmers (NFLCP), to share experiences, promote the use of community access channels and facilities, and lobby for community access to a variety of distribution channels and the democratization of media systems. The NFLCP (renamed the Alliance for Community Media) begins publication of a newsletter which later becomes the *Community Television Review* (CTR, renamed *Community Media Review*, CMR) to share ideas and help strengthen the bonds of community within the group. The organization continues forging links with allies in the long-term struggle for the democratization of media and establishment of a more equitable society—globally and locally. In so doing, the Alliance continues a tradition of global social activism described in this essay in the 1920s and ’30s.

Reassessing Access Philosophy. It’s helpful to occasionally revisit the “big picture” of access within the broader context of global social movements and activist ideology. For one thing, the long history of

alternative media shows us that a grassroots medium can survive and flourish only if linked to and nourished by accompanying social movements. Whether it is a movement focusing on the environment, civil rights, women's issues, media activism, labor concerns, affordable housing, peace issues, etc., it helps to remember that community media are just the tool—not the ends in itself.

It helps to remember, too, that access facilitators are political agents of social change, helping social movements better utilize the tools of media.

This is harder to keep in mind when focused on the day-to-day activities that keep access operating. The need for “how-to” information that can be applied to immediate problems within the access environment often dictates that we close off thoughts about the bigger picture until a more convenient time—a “later” that often never arrives.

Yet, for survival sake, that “later” should be “sooner.” The burnout that can accompany community media facilitation at times can be assuaged by taking the necessary pause for introspection: basically, who are we? Why do we do what we do? What are the philosophies behind community media, and how are the day-to-day practices supporting these philosophies? What assumptions underlying the philosophies have changed for each of us personally—or for the movement?

The Praxis of Access

To grow, people or organizations need to discuss and question shared values and assumptions—vigorously and regularly—recognizing that expansion will often come from those ideas and beliefs most likely to challenge our own. This is the “praxis” of access: a cycle of practice and reflexivity resulting in changed practices....and evolving values and beliefs regarding the nature of access.

The maturing of the NFLCP/Alliance and the community media movement's basic philosophies, can be traced from the pages of *CTR/CMR* and other publications concerned with grassroots, democratic media. In particular, *CTR/CMR* indicate an evolution from pure idealism and naiveté...to more robust ideologies, grounded in both theory and practice.¹

Over the past two and a half decades, the contents of the *CTR/CMR* were concerned primarily with the techniques of access operation: the “how-to's” of man-

aging the facility, training, negotiating franchise agreements, effectively utilizing volunteers, etc. Organizing and lobbying efforts on behalf of community media were discussed. Often there were references to a widely accepted access notion, such as “an individual right to say what she or he wants.” These notions—the underlying belief system of access, drawing from traditional pluralist assumptions about the nature of power, democracy, and freedom of speech—were rarely probed... until around the late 1980s.

Starting at this time, the NFLCP/Alliance went through a vigorous period of critique, questioning basic access concepts. The reevaluation was reflected through the pages of *CTR* and *CMR*, scholarly publications, and “White Papers” presented at national conferences. Access philosophers such as Bob Devine, Fred Johnson, Patricia Aufderheide, Andrew Blau, Dirk Koning, and DeeDee Halleck, among others, reflected a concern with unproblematic assumptions of early access philosophies, and posed new interpretations regarding the significance of access within a shrinking realm of public discourse. The publications matched periods of attention at national conferences on White Papers—single presentations by long-timers in the access movement addressing philosophical issues in community media. The presentations led to on-going discussions regarding the nature of access and the future direction of community media.²

Some of the concepts and issues explored during this period of reevaluation included fascinating discussions regarding:

- ▲ The shift in First Amendment interpretations away from the individual right of a speaker to the collective right that ideas be voiced and heard;

- ▲ Movement away from the notion of “one person, one vote,” based on unfounded assumptions of equal power in the society;

- ▲ A shift away from the notion of “first come, first served,” based on how this concept helps to maintain existing inequalities of power in society;

- ▲ The importance of access within the concept of the “public sphere” (the realm where people are able to discuss items of public importance);

- ▲ Access is best conceptualized as a process involving community dialog rather than as a product involving pol-

ished “TV” programs, mass audiences, or technological toys;

- ▲ The many meanings of “community”—not all of them warm and fuzzy—and how the definitions impact concepts of public access;

- ▲ Media education as a means of “reading” and interpreting the world within notions of power and social change;

- ▲ The impossibility of political “neutrality” on the part of community media and access facilitators (“political” in the framework of power rather than partisan politics);

- ▲ The manner in which training methods are political, in that they force people to view the world through a particular cultural/perceptual “lens;”

- ▲ Attempts by mainstream media to portray “camcorder commandos” as threats to individual privacy.

Cycles of attention to practice and reflexivity and the evolution of basic philosophies are the norm for a maturing organization—or individuals, for that matter. The “how” is helpful in establishing an effective practice; the “why” is necessary in evaluating one's own practice, making appropriate corrections, and moving forward. Praxis, the connection between practice and reflexivity that sees an on-going interplay between the two, is particularly significant for individuals and organizations engaged in the process of social change.

Modern Global Activism

At the heart of the activist movement that was the nascence of community television channels in the U.S. was a continuing global grassroots struggle against the concentration of economic and social power, and the consolidation of corporate media power—with its ensuing stranglehold on information. Today there is a resurgence of global activism favoring similar goals of local determination and community empowerment that have been expressed since the early part of the 20th century, and for centuries prior to that. This renewed climate of activism is now giving birth to yet another form of and approach to media activism: the Independent Media Center (IMC) movement.

In November 1999, this renewed global activist movement flexed its collective muscle. Extensive demonstrations against the World Trade Organization (WTO) meeting in Seattle signaled a resurgence

of global protest against the concentration of economic and social power. Protests have continued around the world against organizations seen as instrumental in the concentration of global power.

A key element of the movement has been the emergence of local IMCs—to distribute information and bypass the gatekeepers of the mainstream media. IMCs are sprouting up around the world, as evidenced by the growing number of centers listed on the IMC website at www.indymedia.org.

The IMC movement presents a unique mixture of video, audio, print, internet, and satellite mediums. In the US, there are some connections between Indy Media Centers and the cable access movement, but the field is ripe for additional collaborations. The links will not always be easy—at times, access seems out of touch with its activist roots, particularly to youthful social and media activists: institutionalized, entrenched, engaged in bureaucratic politics at the local and national levels...with notions of political “neutrality” that seem incongruous to these constituencies.

The challenges and opportunities provided by a resurgence of activism and additional alternative media channels indicate another growth stage in the access cycle of praxis. Technologies such as the Internet and broadband offer sites of current and future struggle. The opportunity to enlist additional partners in a long-term campaign for social justice and media reform at the global level has expanded.

In the 1930s, Brecht spoke about radio. He could easily have been speaking about the struggle for cable access, or broadband access or Internet access, when he said: “...By continuous, unceasing proposals for the better employment of the apparatus in the interest of the community, we must destroy the social basis of that apparatus and question their use in the interests of the few.”

Access cable television in the US is a part of a wider global movement for social change. We can renew the cycle of praxis by connecting with and celebrating access's long-standing roots in social activism and by sharing this story of struggle with volunteers, staff, board members, viewers, city officials, and beyond. The story strengthens in the repetition...and the ripples continue to spread back and forth across the globe.

John W. Higgins [john@mediaprof.org] is associate professor the mass communication department of Menlo College in Atherton, CA. He has been involved in community radio since 1974 and public access since 1981, currently as a member of the board of directors of the San Francisco Community Television Corporation.

Notes

1 In the early 1990s, a research project led me repeatedly through every article in all available issues of the CTR/CMR, seeking discussions that would address the philosophical basis of access. Of particular help was the 10th anniversary issue and Susan Bednarczyk's accounting of the NFLCP history. I am indebted to many people in the NFLCP/Alliance over the years for sharing their visions of community media, starting with my stint as an intern in the national office in 1982. In particular, thanks to Bob Devine and DeeDee Halleck, whose insightful works and valuable feedback have helped me refine my own philosophical perspectives of community media. Thanks, too, to Brenda Dervin of Ohio State University for a broader framework in which to conceptualize the access vision.

2 White Papers from 2001-2003 Alliance conferences are available at www.mediaprof.org/acmwhitepaper. The summer 2002 issue of the CMR, “Rethinking Access Philosophy,” includes white papers from 2001 and 2002.

Pixel Dust & Rainbow Slush: Dichotomies of Digital Distribution

BY DIRK KONING

Telecommunications Inc.'s (TCI) recent announcement that they will phase in digital compression by early 1994 was greeted almost universally with rave reviews and excitement. TCI's CEO, John Malone, went so far as to say, “When we look back, we'll say it (digital compression) was a major milestone for our industry, our country, probably our civilization.” Civilization John? Seven hundred channels, charged by the minute, controlled by those responsible for home shopping, pay-per-view and the recently launched Game Show Channel.

Two simultaneous events are occurring here. First and foremost is the digital conversion of television information from its analog source and secondly its compression into one tenth the usual bandwidth necessary for transmission. It's kinda' like turning a two track road into ten lane highway without widening it. Depending on your franchise, this could mean that you could crunch 10 access channels onto each 6 Mhz of bandwidth available to your community. (That would be 70 channels here in Grand Rapids, Michigan).

More important than compression though is the paradigm shift in information tracking on the most fundamental level. Instead of information waves (analog), we'll now have on/off pulses of particles (digital). These pulses are virtually the same as the way computers move information, and the way audio information is being converted and the way lasers (Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation) send information in light bursts down fiber optic lines. We are talking convergence. Convergence of technology, convergence of signal type, convergence of hardware, software, chips, systems and markets. Some folks have been so bold as to suggest that Malone and Company have actually made an expensive mistake in investing in digital compression on co-axial cable instead of expanding the width of the highway with fiber deployment. Do you cram more shit into the same space (digital compression) or do you go rebuild with fiber and expand the space available? Short term compression, long term fiber.

With the discovery of light wave manipulation and communications, we humans have stumbled across the Pandora's Box of our own biological infrastructure. Without knowing it, we may have closed some evolutionary loop, forever altering our biochemical and physiological make-up. Oh well.

The traditional delineation between media, its methods, regulation and users is blending pixel by pixel into a convergence of rainbow slush. Digitally-coded information all looks alike, whether it is ultimately destined to illuminate your TV or computer screen, vibrate your telephone, stereo speaker or tickle gray matter into delirium tremors.

Voice, video and data are short-circuiting each other and crashing in gigabits and bytes and screaming through uncharted water to crash onto new shores. Sink or swim? I think I'll just float awhile.

Dirk Koning [1957-2005] was executive director of the Community Media Center in Grand Rapids, Michigan. See article page 8.

33 Years Later: Why Access

BY BOB DEVINE

Just before his death in 1985, Antioch College's founder, noted educator Horace Mann, challenged the graduating class to "Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity," and that challenge became the college's mantra. It is thus not surprising that Antioch's curriculum in communications has been, from its beginnings in the mid-1960s, more focused on issues of social justice and social change than it is on media production.

In acquiring a great deal of video equipment through a grant in 1965, the college had been extremely fortunate in never having their efforts defined as "television." Early use of video at Antioch focused on researching feedback and process-oriented applications of the medium rather than on producing "programs." The complement to the usual academic critique of the mass media was the "grounded practice" of change-oriented media work within the political, economic and cultural context of actual communities. It seemed natural in an era of civil rights and anti-war activism, and in the shadow of the Koerner commission report, that the change-oriented community organizing and social justice dimensions of public access work would play a central role in Antioch's program.

The Communications program at Antioch was in large part shaped by student experiences in the field. Antioch students were of course as interested in the allures of new technologies and networks as most, but they were more interested in the potential of those technologies for engaging communities and improving the human condition. The coalition that came together around public access at Antioch mirrored the coalition that came together at the national level in the interest of securing access provisions in federal regulation. Some had read work from the Challenge for Change program, saw the new media as auguring activism and community empowerment, and were drawn to activities involving community organizing. Some had abiding interest in public policy *vis a vis* the information economy and the existing communications infrastructure, and were drawn to regulatory

and franchise work. A number had strong interests in democratic theory and First Amendment issues, and were drawn to system design, policy formation, and devising of the mechanisms to enfranchise broader constituents in support of invigorating local (and national) political dialogue and debate. Those interested in the potential of technology for expression saw public access as a new venue for art, as an experimental arena for the exploration of new technologies, and as a means to preserve and protect unique local cultural practices. Still another thread of interest had grounding in Frietian approaches to education, and some students found themselves actively experimenting with the training programs of public access to test models of community education and "problematizing." The intellectual fervor that motivated this generation of Antioch student and faculty activists derived from Dorothy Todd Henaut, George Stoney, Tim Kennedy, Paolo Friere, Red Burns, Nicholas Johnson and Paul Ryan.

The Communications Studies Center developed a hands-on curriculum that engaged Antioch students in franchising, training and activist work across the country. Since the 1920s the core of Antioch's educational model has been a cooperative education program that requires students to spend every other term off-campus working on a "co-op job." Students with interests in social justice, political change, community organizing, cybernetics, and the emerging landscape of new technologies and delivery systems gravitated toward co-op job opportunities in cable and public access. They assumed leadership of various projects involving franchising, ascertainment, training and access startup, both as co-op jobs, and as student-initiated courses on campus. And so Antioch student Trisha Dair did research on community ascertainment and training and wrote grants; Steve Christiansen worked on developing models of networked programming; Howard Horton worked on writing franchises; Dinah LeHoven and Rick Newberger worked on franchising and the development of training systems; and a host of other students got involved in var-

ious access startups and training opportunities. Those with a direct influence on those of us at Antioch included Sue Buske, Jim Bell, Jean Rice, Fred Johnson, Margie Nicholson, and of course George Stoney.

A number of the principles of the community-based media work that emerged during those early years of public access continue to inform and guide Antioch's program and my own reflections about the future direction of community access. In contemplating the next 33 years of public access (and I hope to be involved throughout), it seems important to me to be thinking beyond the tactical, strategic and operational dimensions of public access work to consider "why" it is an important effort, and why it is critical that we defend, preserve and extend public access. And so I offer a beginning list of the principles and potentials of public access that have to do with community outcomes.

1 Public access shifts the balance between producers and consumers of communications messages. The impermeable roles of producers of messages (active and few in number) and consumers of messages (passive and many in number) reflect the economic organization of media industries, not the predisposition of (a) the uses to which people might put communications technologies, were such technologies to be at their disposal, or (b) the ends to be served by way of interaction, cultural practice, etc. Jankowski, Prehn and Stappers, in *The People's Voice: Local Radio and Television in Europe*, (Jankowski, et. al., 1992) describe an alternative in which communicants are "sendceivers," and are actively engaged in both roles in the communication process.

Public access draws private citizens into public life, transforming consumers into public speakers/participants, and moving them from passive into active roles of engagement in the civic life of their community. The results are a more lively and participatory local democratic forum, an arena where global issues and entertainment is balanced by the presence of unique local cultural practices and expression, and where participants become more engaged as an active polity

rather than as a target for communication messages.

2 As a corollary, public access permits a focus on the public good rather than the private good. Mass media delivery systems confine “audiences” to the role of individual consumers. In our “marketplace of ideas”, our speech is relatively free from domination by the state, but it is not free from domination by the market. Markets produce private good, but not necessarily public good. The marketplace of ideas, for example, provides the most benefit for those with the necessary resources to enter and utilize its potential. Corporate entities stridently assert rights as self-interested speakers (private good), and their marketing, advertising or public relations messages go unchallenged in terms of the value and common benefit of their messages (public good). In addition, such messages go unchallenged by speakers lacking sufficient resources to enter the marketplace on an equal footing. Public opinion regarding the public good has been transformed into something that is assessed on the basis of aggregate individual interests through polling, and distributed rather than forged by an informed and active public.

While the First Amendment protects autonomous expression (a private good), a parallel thread involves, in the language of Supreme Court Justice Brennan in *New York Times Company vs. Sullivan*, the goal of an uninhibited, robust and open marketplace of ideas (a public good). An enlightened and informed policy depends on having access to a diversity of opinions and viewpoints and being able to engage in public dialogue and discussion about such viewpoints in attempting to ascertain the truth. Public access has often forgotten its responsibility for this public dimension of the First Amendment over the years, and has followed the path of least resistance in championing autonomous individual expression, without promoting the utilitarian values of public discussion, deliberation and debate.

Public access potentially provides a viable forum beyond the intimidation or intervention of the state, and beyond the economic imperatives or dominance of the marketplace, where individuals can come together to deliberate on the issues of the day. Though it can be enslaved by the private benefits of autonomous expression, it has the potential, as well, to

champion the speech that promotes the principles of popular sovereignty, to sustain a system of democratic deliberation, and to promote broad concern with the “common good”.

3 The work of public access involves building “social capital.” The interaction and collaboration of community members in the various processes of public access can create a sense of mutuality, trust, reciprocity and support that has been referred to as “social capital” (Putnam, 1993). “If members of the group come to expect that others will behave reliably and honestly,” Francis Fukayama notes, “then they will come to trust one another. Trust acts like a lubricant that makes any group or organization run more efficiently.” (Fukayama, 2000, p. 98) In the process of bringing community members together in access-related work, many of us have discovered that the networks of association, the alliances across improbable boundaries, and the coalitions and collaborations that result in unique community dynamics, are often times more productive, valuable and fascinating than whatever actual programming is produced.

The benefits of such social capital are striking. Strangers become acquaintances, and often allies. Their voluntary association, work and contributions to the common good of the community through public access activity builds a “bank” of social capital upon which they and other members of the community can draw at some future time. Individual citizens move from the individual consumer role to the collective agent role, and begin to act as a “public”, outside of the state and the marketplace. The work of individuals and groups in access often extends to civic and community projects and activism beyond the scope of the particular access activity. The dialogue engendered contributes to the solution of complex community problems and contributes to a healthy civil society.

Public access inevitably contributes to the pool of social capital in every community in which it exists.

4 Public access permits cultural integrity of media expression. Public

access permits participants to frame expression that is *shaped by and addresses* their own cultural position, to produce representations which are sensitive to, congruent with and appropriate to the issues of their own cultural orientation, and to use public access to correct the inaccurate, incorrect, misleading or demeaning images of the mainstream media with regard to particular cultural positions, orientations or issues. Rather than being spoken about or spoken for, public access speakers are of the community in which they are speaking, and are able to speak for themselves. (See Jay Ruby, 1991, for a discussion of the subtle differences involved)

Public access permits a level of cultur-

Public access permits a level of cultural integrity of expression that is unparalleled in most media channels, and this is one of the unique strengths of the public access endeavor.

al integrity of expression that is unparalleled in most media channels, and this is one of the unique strengths of the public access endeavor.

5 Public access contributes to the development of critical literacy.

According to Everett Rogers, literacy implies the mastery of symbols, the ability to encode and decode messages, or “write” and “read,” to manipulate symbols, to generalize through symbolization, to restructure reality via the manipulation of symbols, to empathize with roles beyond one’s experience, to think counterfactually, and “to create a mental distinction between symbol and reality.” (Rogers, 1969, p. 72) Literacy implies the power to speak and have influence, the power to act, and the ability to distance oneself from the expediences of everyday existence through the use of symbols.

Literacy of course implies the ability to have access to information (including active information-seeking), to interpret, analyze, evaluate and “read” media critically, to reflect on and deconstruct the codes and methods of message construction, and ultimately, “To name and analyze conditions of every day life and organize against them.” (Kidd, 1993, p.23). What is

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Publicly Owned Networks: Considering the Options

BY BRENDA J. TRAINOR

Local governments, like every other entity in our economy, are challenged by living in the telecommunications revolution. Some, either *de facto* or by choice, are the owners of various kinds of telecom resources.

An interesting question arises: What is the appropriate role for a municipal government regarding ownership of telecom resources? The question is posed in the singular because there clearly is no universal answer covering all municipal governments. Many pundits have argued that information is our new essential service, with telecom technologies serving as the essential infrastructure. As roads drove a developing agricultural economy, and electrification powered an industrial/manufacturing economy, telecommunications connects the information economy.

Few would argue that municipal governments should not invest to improve the quality of their essential services and, like other major service organizations, municipal governments are upgrading their basic information systems to do just that.

In a similar vein, governments are investing in systems to decrease the cost of providing services. And some technologies allow services that would otherwise be unaffordable: through cable franchises, cities can afford a government access channel, where the acquisition of a broadcast station would have been both spectrum- and cost-prohibitive. And these franchises have enabled many cities to operate "I-Nets" connecting public facilities—such as schools, libraries, and government facilities—offering improved government services and reduced costs.

Finally, governments are upgrading their internal support systems to improve operations, meet expanding administrative and legal requirements and to lower costs wherever possible. Integrated human resources and payroll systems, emergency response systems, and computer aided dispatch are but a few examples.

Clearly, the business of government requires telecommunications. The bandwidth requirements of advanced applica-

tions require robust, wide-area networks for connectivity. Government's need for technological access to locations throughout a community has led to the growth of typically fiber-rich, municipal area networks or "MANs."

As increased bandwidth need is coupled with the dissolution of monopoly providers, local governments have a responsibility to explore all options to best plan for the most affordable and most useful network that will meet present and future needs and budgets. For a city, these options can include buying network services from retail or wholesale providers; or building and operating its own network.

Or cities can combine these two options by entering into either joint public/private ventures, or by offering services on their network for sale to the public—becoming a service competitor. Some cities are stepping boldly onto the field of competitive battle, wrestling for consumer's cash, and, at times, even seeking publicly-supported financing for capitalization and operation of phone, cable, data transport, and internet services. Are these appropriate government functions? That answer depends not only on the needs of the community, but on the character of the governmental entity.

As an economic development strategy, it is clearly within a local government's interest to assure that the community enjoys the best possible telecom services at competitive prices, both to meet the growing information needs of its residents and to serve as an attraction for new knowledge-based businesses. To economic development strategists, telecom networks today offer urban and rural locales the advantages offered yesterday by the railroad, an airport, a stadium, or a redeveloped downtown theatre district.

Why would a city seek to compete with private enterprise in telecom services? After all, the industry is very dynamic, both technologically and financially. As organizations, municipal governments are not known as "lean and mean" service providers. What can they possibly offer to the telecommunications consumer that

private enterprise cannot?

The simple answer to that question is: Probably nothing. However, the question should be framed somewhat differently: What can municipalities possibly offer to the telecommunications consumer that private enterprise will not offer? The answer to that question is not simple. For one thing, it depends on the consumer. If the consumer is poor and the service is Internet access, the need may not be met by the marketplace—period. If the consumer is a small business and the service is a very high-speed data line, the need may not be met by the marketplace at a price the consumer can afford. The overall community well-being can suffer in the absence of service, or of affordable service.

The decades-old concern about information "haves vs. have-nots" is now a measurable trend. A 1997 study found that higher percentages of ethnic minorities were unfamiliar with the internet than whites. A study released in 1998 reported clear, and not surprising, delineations of computer penetration based on household income: those with money had access to the information infrastructure; those without, don't or can't get online. It would appear that the makeup of our communities is becoming more stratified, not more unified. And local governments deal first, and first-hand, with the deleterious effects of such stratification.

To prevent damaging social consequences, a city may incorporate telecom services into its solutions. Some provide computer access, email addresses, and Internet access through libraries and community centers. The debate over the appropriateness of a government-owned network should focus on a few key issues.

▲ **The first:** What is the nature of the municipal authority? Does it have the experience, the culture and the human resources to operate an advanced telecommunications network?

▲ **The second issue:** What is the constituency being served and can its needs be met best by the private markets?

▲ **The third issue:** Is it fair to have the authority that manages the rights-of-way compete with users of the rights-of-way?

often overlooked, however, is the manner in which "writing" informs reading. With electronic media, the capacity for symbol manipulation and counter-factual thinking permits the development of critical, rather than imitative literacy. The construction of messages leads to the analysis of the manner in which meaning is generated and circulated through media messages. The critical reader/writer of electronic messages (the public access producer, or "sendceiver") is able to articulate grievances, to organize and collectivize action, to open up sites of opposition and analysis, to express cultural positions and values, to register opposition, to propose alternative courses of action, to influence others, and contribute to the formation of public opinion. The ability to write, in short, provides rich and productive avenues for civic participation.

Public access provides a point of entry into the power and dominance channels of electronic communication. Its capacity to develop critical literacy—both reading and writing—significantly enhances the possibility of true democratic participation among its participants.

As the technology, the delivery systems, layers of regulation and the general corporate and political environment of electronic communications continues to evolve with each new generation of access producers and providers, what continues to remain relevant, current and focused 33 years later are the fundamental principles of why community access is so critical to civic and democratic culture.

Bob Devine [bob@mnn.org] is currently interim executive director of Manhattan Neighborhood Network. He has been involved with public access since 1968; has participated in the startup of the Dallas, Milwaukee and Manhattan access systems; and is past president of and still professor at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio.

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Addressing the last issue first, it seems clear that a municipality that coordinates its regulatory role with its competitive role for the purpose of aiding its own success in the marketplace to the detriment of private competitors could face antitrust liability. While this is a legitimate issue for debate, most municipalities and their attorneys are very cognizant of their exposure and will not venture forth into the competitive environment until appropriate safeguards are in place.

As for the nature of the municipal authority, if the municipality operates its own utility enterprises, it may well have the culture and the human resources to construct and manage a MAN. In contrast, if the municipal authority has no experience in providing utility services directly to paying customers, then it may be difficult for the organization to manage a competitive telecom network. However, since many cities that do not operate utilities do lease real property to private entities, it may be deemed an acceptable risk for such a city to build infrastructure, like conduit in the rights-of-way, for the purpose of leasing it to competitive telephone and cable companies. The unique character of each city must be considered.

If information is truly an essential service, then governments have a traditional role to fulfill—making certain that this essential service is available to everyone, at prices that will enable all but the most disadvantaged to partake without subsidy.

Some providers have responded to the perceived threat of municipal competition by seeking legislative relief in the form of state laws prohibiting the construction of municipal networks. The irony of this approach is apparent. Carriers and operators that should have an overwhelming competitive advantage in terms of human resources, organizational structure, market experience, motivation and existing market share have eschewed competition for protection from a higher governmental authority.

Whether or not a city chooses to enter into the competitive market, either at the wholesale or retail market—through public/private ventures, or through direct sales to businesses and residents—is a serious question requiring thorough and thoughtful analysis. This is not a decision that should be dictated to cities from another distant authority, or an industry seeking competitive protections. It is an appropriate debate for any community.

Governments are often criticized for being slow-moving, costly, bureaucratic behemoths. Clearly, we should applaud the innovators who seek to do the business of local government better. Can these innovators succeed in a competitive telecommunications world? Some may, some may not. The burden of choice—to enter a market or not—is great for local government, worthy of extensive local debate and careful review of market conditions, community needs, and business factors that will determine long term success. Opportunities need to be explored: consider options for infrastructure and services: why not privatize some public services, and expand public provision of traditionally "private" services?

In an idealized world, the availability of adequate infrastructure, advanced telecom services and affordable prices will be provided in a timely manner by private companies engaged in vigorous competition. However, until consumers see that idealized world, it is most clearly in the public interest for local governments to exercise freely their right to debate, discuss, analyze, and make difficult choices about telecommunications infrastructures. Cities must have the option to explore all technology and service innovations, to do the business of government better, to preserve the economic vitality of their tax base, and to enhance the quality of life that is unique to, and uniquely defines, each community.

Brenda J. Trainor [trainor@frontiertrail.com] is the principal in Frontier Trail, Inc., a management consultancy formed in 1998 specializing in communications, technology, and community issues providing strategic services to telecommunications providers, government entities, and nonprofit organizations. She serves as vice chair of Community Media of the Foothills, the PEG access corporation in Monrovia, California.

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Free Speech in the '90s: Myths and Realities

In his numerous books and lectures, Herbert I. Schiller [1919-2000] shattered the myth that we Americans live in an open society with a free marketplace of ideas. His work exposed the enormous role corporations play in shaping our culture and communications. At the time of this address in July 1991 at the annual conference of the National Federation of Local Cable Programmers [today Alliance for Community Media] in Portland, Oregon, Schiller was Emeritus Professor of Communication at the University of California at San Diego. He had lectured widely throughout the world and written a number of important books, among them *Communications and the American Empire*, *The Mind Managers*, and *Culture Inc.: The Corporate Takeover of Public Expression* to name only several.

BY HERBERT I. SCHILLER

What I think all of us here are aware, but which is still hardly conscious to the rest of our population is the cultural degradation in our society. The degradation of the cultural environment. Already public schools around the country are showing in the classes commercials brought to you by a subsidiary of Time Warner. Another sacred area has succumbed and is succumbing across the nation to the hucksters right into the classroom itself. You go to a museum, a scientific center, and what do you see? Corporate logos on exhibits—science brought to you by TRW, Rockwell and Exxon.

Of course, you of all people are familiar with what happened to the mandate of public noncommercial television. There is no such animal any longer. First it started very courteously and very discreetly, and now it's just a rampant commercialism in our public television. And if you're a sports fan, why, you're not watching sports. You're just watching the most gargantuan kind of commercial enterprise that's imaginable. Coca-Cola is in there and so are some of the other big ones and thereby one enterprise, which at one time was an actual human enterprise, a creative enterprise, a skill enterprise all

being co-opted. That's what I mean when I talk about corporate despoliation and environmental pollution of the cultural field.

Now in this particular field a very curious paradoxical condition exists. We have recognized that the First Amendment is our defense for freedom of speech; we realize it's still an ideal. We realize all of the violations that have occurred. But we still struggle and we still feel pretty good that we have a First Amendment. But what is observable is this: the First Amendment is our amendment, it's a people's amendment, it's for individual's expression, and has been taken and turned around and interpreted through one Supreme Court decision after another, into an amendment that defends what is called euphemistically "corporate speech." Sometimes they call it "commercial speech."

When they break up Dan Rather for a commercial, that's corporate speech. When you go to a ballgame, and then you see the billboards, that's corporate speech. Under increasing interpretations, this corporate speech has been given the protection, not yet totally but well on the way, of the First Amendment. The First Amendment is now being regarded as protecting this kind of speech. You might say that just broadens it out, makes it more democratic. Why limit it to us? Why exclude one part of the society? Because this is not a broadening. It is a narrowing, a kind of pressing inward rather than moving outward.

And why is that? Well, there are many reasons, but let me just mention one. It's been alluded to here already today. With the new communications technology, with the vast networks and the control of the networks, with the access to satellites, in order for the largest dominant voice to be heard, it's got to be backed up by a tremendous amount of funds. And who has the funds? The Fortune 500. So, with an interpretation that allows corporate speech to be regarded as equally secure under the First Amendment we find that the voice of the individual creative per-

son, whether a singer, writer, journalist, or broadcaster gets pressed to the margin and the dominant expression is then presented by the corporate interest.

So I would say at this time not only do we have our customary battles, not only do we have the book burners and the people who don't like this idea or that idea being expressed, the people who intimidate librarians for having a book on the shelf. We have those, unfortunately, and plenty of them, but those battles are relatively visible. But this battle has been going on without any real public recognition of what has happened, and so now you see the First Amendment protects us to a degree, without romanticizing it against the abuses of the government. Government control of information. Government intervention, informational dissemination.

Power in our society has continuously been pyramided and concentrated, so that today the real power is not in Congress. We know where the real decisions are made. But the real threat to our society today comes from an area that's not even recognized, not even identified.

And how would it be identified? Who is going to call it? Who is going to make the various statements? Where is that declaration going to come from? So that is our agenda today. To be able to recognize the transformations in this society and to be able to contest those transformations at a totally new level. Now, how do we do that? What do we do about this? Well, the very first thing is to make it known and ask the question. Now all of you over the last two or three years have noticed these good faith and enormously red, white and blue identifications of Phillip Morris with the Bill of Rights.

There have been all kinds of commercials on that. You've seen the founding fathers in wig and costume and Phillip Morris saying, "Oh this our Constitution. Let's defend it." And what is the real message there? What is the, as they say in academic jargon, the subtext? It is our right to give you a message any way we like, to induce you to kill yourself. That's the

continued on page 41

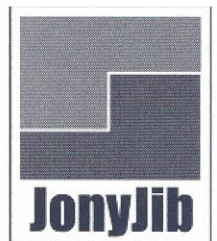
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message. Because, Phillip Morris, we know what they are producing and what they are selling, but they give us the other message, "Let's defend the Bill of Rights," but they're talking about a very different Bill of Rights.

They are talking about this new interpretation, which says, "Yes, we have the right to make any kind of a message we like and that's defended under the Constitution." That doesn't necessarily mean we have to say you can't express anything at all if you're corporation, but we have to begin to be able to make our choices, to make our careful, distinguishing points of what is a legitimate message and what is not a legitimate message.

Wouldn't it be nice to have our political leadership propose a tax in this society, a tax on advertising, and that tax would be given exclusively to independent television workers and groups so that they can begin to mount the kind of a rejoinder that at this time goes unresponded to. But I think it's time to allow the creative forces in this society to get full expression and to begin to limit the forces that themselves, although they like to don the garb of openness and freedom and full expression, are basically concerned with pressing their own partisan interests.

Well that is our job. To redeem our past. To expand our present, and to make the future a little bit more tolerable for a truly open creative spirit and a full expression, which at the present time, is so narrow, so weak, so attenuated, that most of us cringe. Thank you.

Access in the 1990s: A Modest Manifesto

BY FRED JOHNSON

▲ Refuse to be defined by the dead language of the cable franchise, which is based on abstract political jurisdictions that are designed to cut off communication by definition. Instead, work the networks of real communication that define real community.

▲ Create legal arguments to justify your refusal to be confined to the franchise.

▲ Diversify funding, using the franchise as a core.

▲ Build close working relationships with the various networks of community-based organization. They are another form of real community. Learn to recognize the difference between genuine community groups and those that are just fronts for the powers-that-be, then give preference to the genuine ones.

▲ Understand that arts organizations have become central organizations in the community. Understand that many of them are under the same kind of pressures as access when it comes to censorship.

▲ Don't fight the market for programming. Define the difference between commercial, corrupt programming and programming that can be sold to other outlets. Become a go-between for producers and the market. Consider principled spin-offs from access, where the values of community media can begin showing up in commercial programming. Consider using public funds to start local production efforts that are flexible in the sense that they can be distributed in a number of venues.

▲ Stop worrying about independent producers making a few dollars from the work they do in access. Encourage them sell/distribute their work after it runs in your community. Access needs producers who make good community television, and they will not stick around if their efforts are restricted to Bush-style volunteerism.

▲ Forget the narrow mission statements in the franchise regarding television. Become diverse community media centers. Become the primary site for media education and media training. Immediately start courses in computer literacy, home video, organizational uses of the new phone systems, and digital photography. Do not define your organization only in terms of television.

▲ Abandon the pseudo-neutral approach to training and education that claims to be avoiding imposing a style or visual language on the community. Develop a training approach that allows people to understand how communication is fundamentally implicated in oppression. Learn what is undemocratic about the forms communication that have developed from exploitive practice and counter it with new forms. Open these issues up to explicit debate within the center and the community.

▲ Find and implement legal arguments for all of the above. Be as clever and ruthless in tgis as the cable companies that are working to rid themselves of access.

Fred Johnson [fjohnson@mwg.org] directs the Community Media and Technology Program at UMass Boston's College of Public and Community Service www.cpcs.umb.edu/cmt. He is a founding member of Media Working Group Inc.

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Freedom & Community: Staying Relevant in the Digital Age

BY DIRK KONING

Stories will always need to be told. Money will always need to be made. Messages will always seek an audience. Voices will always vie to be heard. Songs will always need singers.

What role, if any, will community media have in the burgeoning future of the microcosm and telecosm? What if access ceases to be a cause? What if cost diminishes to match need? What if bandwidth is unlimited and becomes commodified and free?

What do we uniquely provide?

Freedom in a word. Freedom from market force “success” based on return. Freedom from “cost effective” consolidation of labor and capital for profit. Freedom from “time is money” messages that compress reality for effect. Freedom from mass appeal. Freedom to fail. Freedom to target niche markets. Freedom to be unpopular yet distributed. Freedom to express fears fearlessly. Freedom to have the search justify itself. Freedom to preserve culture, language and minority views. Freedom from “price per minute” schemes. Freedom from top down control. Freedom from the pap of global consolidation. Freedom from the medium being the message. Freedom to have the medium be the message. Freedom to be disturbing.

How will we perpetuate this freedom in an expanding and chaotic world constantly being designed to “brand” us while dangling “freedom” as a purchasable commodity?

Content. Content. Content. It seems the conduit is becoming increasingly ubiquitous. A bit is a bit is a bit whether it traverses the air as an electron wave or a photon particle, and curses through antiquated copper lines or fiber optic filaments. Why should we care how it reaches an ear, eye or flesh?

Our richness is in Community and Freedom. If, “all politics are local” then what of “all media”? Will time and space rebound as critical life factors? Will geographic proximity continue to have measurable effects on love, life and commerce? Will the exponential growth of more

If we promote the message as the message, not the medium as the message, we will stay relevant. If we use media as a social development tool, we will remain relevant. If we define ourselves and not let ourselves be defined by corporate media, we will remain relevant...

media amplify the value of local, local, local? You betcha!

How do we stay focused on the “meat of the message” and not follow the trend to have the sheer consumption of the message “be the meat”? Are lives based on having less freer than lives based on either doing or being as William James suggested? How do we capture hearts when capturing “eyeballs” is the mantra? Why do we deserve to survive? Will we cross the line of direct media input into brains and bodies? Will we wake up one day with our mission fulfilled and be done? Unlikely!

Trust seems to be another attribute we can claim. Who can you trust to give you the facts on equipment, technology, programming, and education? What of motive? If media centers keep motives clear—to share as opposed to seeing what the market will bear—we can stay relevant. If we promote the message as the message, not the medium as the message, we will stay relevant. If we use media as a social development tool, we will remain relevant. If we define ourselves and not let ourselves be defined by corporate media, we will remain relevant. If we constantly ask our communities what they need and then deliver, we will remain relevant. If we preserve our community’s aural and visual history through community archives, we will remain relevant. If we assist non-profit groups in achieving their mission we will remain relevant. If we put people first and technology second, we will remain relevant. If we commit to paying living wages, we will remain relevant. If we keep community boards focused on mission instead of management minutia, we will remain relevant. If we are willing to reinvent ourselves to serve, we will remain relevant.

This multi-media, digital future seems to be cluttered with new products, sooth-

sayers and pitfalls. No one really seems to have a handle on societal effects from the information revolution. The adage that seems to shine through is, “the more things change, the more they stay the same.” Dot coms seem to be losing their newby luster and many are just plain going down the dot toilet. Email has changed the way we communicate, but I still don’t write my Mom enough. It may easily take a full generation for any perspective to surface as fact.

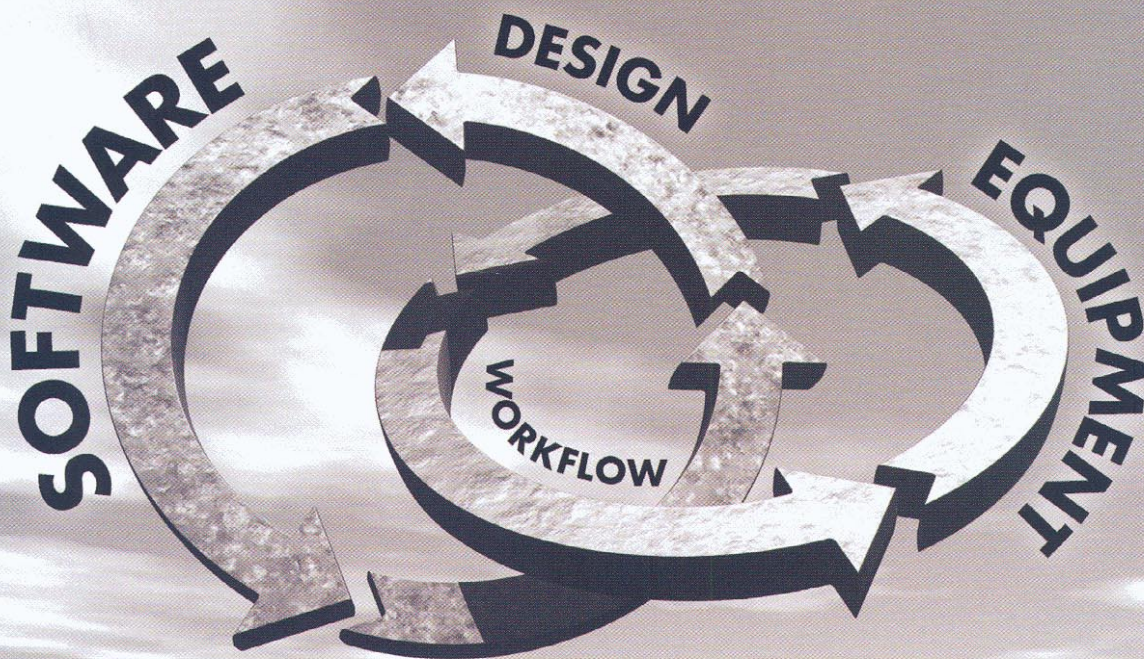
I am more optimistic about the future these days than I have been in the past. Maybe the longer we live the more relative perspective we acquire. As I see libraries continuing to be used and funded, I realize the media centers can and should be folded into the fabric of a community as a critical institution. We should just be careful to not be “institutionalized.”

After one of our recent orientation sessions at the Community Media Center where we cover all the rules and responsibilities and liabilities, etc., I had a cocky 17-year-old come up to me and say, “Mr. Koning, I believe you have created the institution my generation will be forced to dismantle.” Punk. My first instinct was to extricate his Adam’s apple from his throat. But I remained calm and realized that the world works that way. (I ended up co-opting him by hiring him into the institution he wants to dismantle.) Anyway, we have had the good fortune to get a decade or two of development under our belts and we need to stay focused on the things that matter most. Freedom and Community. Power to the People.

“The price of freedom is eternal vigilance.”
—Thomas Jefferson

The late Dirk Koning was executive director of the Community Media Center in Grand Rapids, Michigan. See story page 8.

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Paul Congo, Executive Director of Access Monterey Peninsula, has spent over 25 years involved in community access television, and along the way, he learned what it takes to succeed in this broadcast field.

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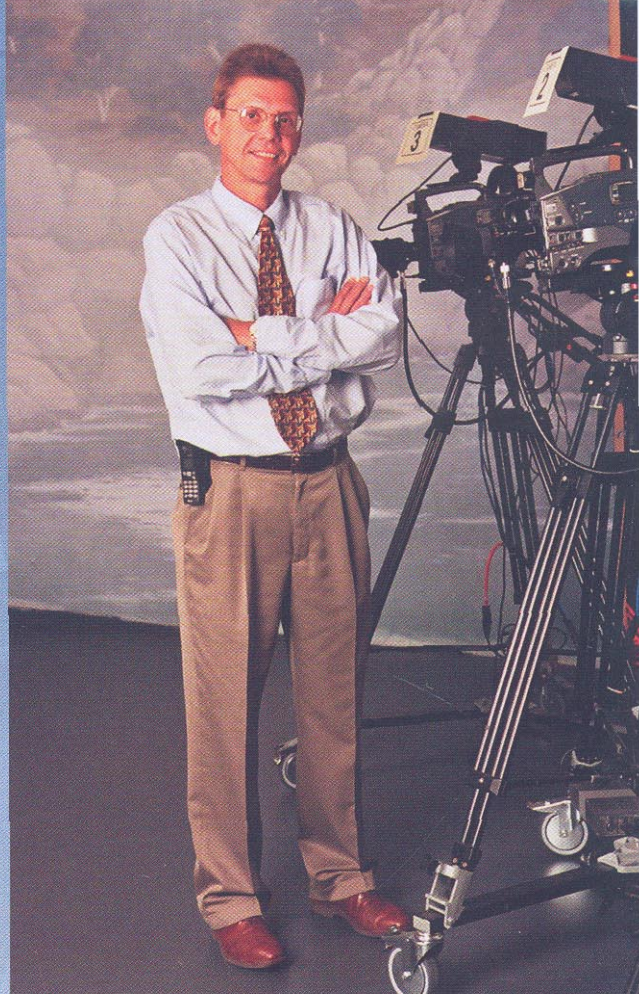
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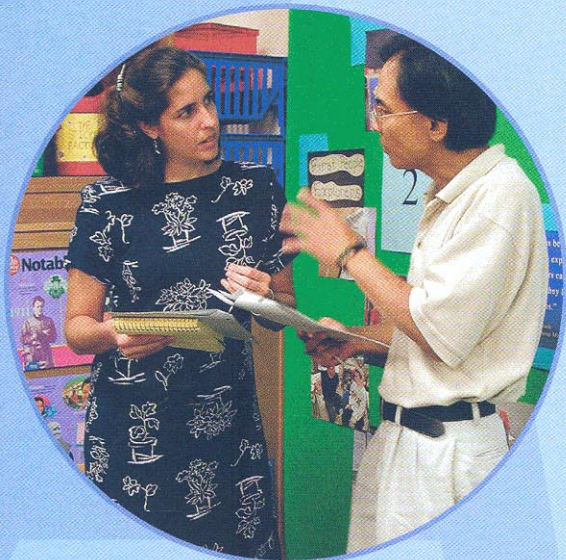
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